ADA 16 Rebel Stand

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Pyria System
Jaina hung her head; reaching desperately out to the one person she knew she'd never feel again. Her little brother was dead.
Dead.
Two weeks had past and the word still twisted her gut as if a vibroblade had been shoved into it. One moment she felt him, and the next, his Force presence was simply gone; a gaping wound in her soul. There was no other explanation for what could have happened. Somehow, somewhere in the merciless darkness of the galaxy, her brother lay cold and lifeless.
The resounding victory over the Yuuzhan Vong commander's first attack felt empty and insignificant in comparison. She hadn't celebrated. Hadn't shared a smile or a glass with the rest of her squadron. Instead of alcohol, she filled herself with guilt. She had promised herself that, one way or another, she would get her little brother out of this damned war and make sure he was alive and happy. But all her efforts had all been for naught.
What made his death worse was that she had felt the same things he had experienced during his last moments of life. Their sibling bond had flared to intense levels, as if Anakin had been desperately trying to draw as much strength from her as possible. That, despite the distance, it had almost been as if she had been right there along side him. Feeling and seeing as he did. His last moments had been full of terror, of pain; on a level Jaina didn't even think Anakin could feel. Raw, unfiltered fear. Blinding flashes of agony so strong that even Tahiri had doubled over, green eyes wide with panic and terror.
The way Tahiri had screamed Anakin's name when he suddenly disappeared from the Force still haunted Jaina. The sheer level of misery and loneliness leaking through the younger teen's mental shields made it clear just how badly she was suffering. It had taken a full week after Anakin's disappearance from the Force for Tahiri to even leave his quarters. During that time, Tahiri hadn't emerged for meals or said a single word. She would have wasted away had Mara not personally brought meals to her.
The one time Jaina had looked in on the younger teen, Tahiri had been curled up in a ball in Anakin's bunk, his clothes overly large on her small form. Her green eyes vacant, her face blank. That had been

enough for Jaina's own eyes to fill with tears, and the brown-haired Jedi hadn't had the strength to look at Tahiri after that.
Despite everything though, a distraught Tahiri had reaffirmed her commitment to the Coruscant mission and had left with Wraith Squadron only three short days ago. She had left with a listless expression in her eyes, something that the more veteran soldiers had easily recognized; her soul had died and her body was just waiting to catch up. Tahiri wouldn't abandon the Freed Ones. It was a project she and Anakin had started, and Tahiri had told others that she had wanted to see the project through until the end. Jaina was only afraid of what 'the end' entailed.
Jaina abandoned her futile efforts and forced her emotions back into a box. Now wasn't the time to dwell on what she couldn't change
She angled her X-wing out from beneath the *Rebel Dream*, her shieldmates following. The long, triangle profile of the Imperial Star Destroyer whooshed by in an instant.
"All right, here's the plan," she said, clearing her throat slightly. "We go in looking like we're going to punch into the center of their formation, but instead we turn to starboard and skirt along its edge. As each target comes up, we concentrate fire on it, just like those drills we did. Ready?"
Kyp's voice was smooth, with a hint of concern: "Always ready when you are, Goddess."
"I am ready as well, Goddess," Jag acknowledged.
Jaina knew that the fact Jag had responded verbally instead of a regular click of the comlink was his way of showing his worry for her. And in a way, his voice did give her some amount of reassurance. She fought back tears again as their shield-trio approached the enemy fighters.
"Fire and break."
Jaina's shield-trio was meant, as usual, to be a decoy. While the coralskippers and their supporting craft focused on trying to kill her, the *Mon Mothma* would carry out the mission of escorting the reinforcements and civilian cargo vessels through a dovin basal mine field.
As another coralskipper burned from the combined laser burst of two X-wings and a clawcraft, Jaina found her concentration straying again. Memories of a younger Anakin in her mind, happily smiling as he tried to solve the latest puzzle Jacen and herself had gotten him. He hadn't done much of either in the last couple of years. The war had ensured that the only puzzles that were available for him to solve were ones

that were life or death. Now he wouldn't ever smile or indulge in hers and Jacen's silly challenges ever again.
"Goddess, be advised, a coralskipper has marked you," Jag's voice snapped her out of her thoughts just in time.
Jaina nudged her X-wing and barely avoided the missile that had been fired at her. She looped around and proceeded to pound the stuffing out of the coralskipper who had dared shoot at her. Both Kyp and Jag joined in once they got their own targeting solutions, and another coralskipper soon floated about in ruins.
Jaina mentally berated herself. She didn't need to add to anyone's grief by getting herself killed. As she sent her fighter back towards the *Rebel Dream*, in the distance, the *Mon Mothma* began her part of the mission.
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Coruscant
Mara Jade Skywalker, Jedi Master, walked point with her apprentice, meters ahead of the rest of the party.
Part of her reason for keeping Tahiri up front with her was to watch over her. The other part was because they were both wearing Yuuzhan Vong armor and the same faux-ooglith masquer they had worn during the mission to save Shaeri. Having someone who knew the Yuuzhan Vong language at her side was useful if they ran into any Yuuzhan Vong patrols, even if they had all been given tizowryms; the Yuuzhan Vong version for a translator. Who knew if the tizowrym could pick up on Yuuzhan Vong slang or hidden meanings behind seemingly innocuous words. Mara didn't want to go ask a Yuuzhan Vong warrior how his father was and later find out she had just insulted his family.
A sidelong glance at her apprentice revealed nothing but the stoic expression on Tahiri's Wraith-manufactured ooglith masquer.
"I'm fine," Tahiri said curtly, having sensed Mara's concerned gaze.
"Of course you are," Mara replied evenly.
She knew the last thing Tahiri wanted was pity. It was the last thing Mara wanted too. The death of Anakin had hit her just as hard. Even worse because Mara also felt the pain Luke was feeling at his loss. Their only consolation was that Ben was safely tucked away, far from any harm. She and Luke got through the pain together, and then focused on putting the rest of their family back together. She couldn't even imagine what Leia or Jaina were going through. She knew well enough what her young apprentice was feeling.
After Anakin's death, Tahiri had gone through the usual denial, anger, and grief. But then seemed to just kill her emotions altogether. She had distanced herself from everyone else, lessened any Force bonds

she might have had. Just like Jaina had become, Tahiri was suddenly afraid to let anyone in, to open herself up for the possibility of getting hurt again.

Mara gestured at a nearby building. "Think we should break here for now? It's sheltered and out of the way."

The building in question was an abandoned bar; its shelves long emptied of their contents. A landing pad from one of the upper stories had crashed through the roof of the structure, creating debris that would provide additional cover if they were attacked.

Tahiri gave an uncaring shrug and unslung her pack from over her shoulders. The rest of their group, both Yuuzhan Vong and those who looked like Yuuzhan Vong, arrived shortly after. A dozen Freed Ones were on the mission, in addition to some of Wraith Squadron, Jan Ors, Danni Quee, and Jedi Masters Jaden Korr and Kyle Katarn. While the New Republic members of the group wore the false Yuuzhan Vong faces and artificial Vong armor—designed to look and feel like the real thing—the Freed Ones were dressed up in the outfits they had worn when they were still Shamed.

The group of New Republic infiltrators had been integrating Freed Ones, in small numbers, with the Shamed population in the numerous lambent fields and grutchin enclosures that dotted the Vong-shaped surface of Coruscant. Most of the Freed Ones, Taan included, had already said their goodbyes and rejoined their less fortunate brethren. With the knowledge that a major Yuuzhan Vong slave-field was nearby, thanks to information from a group of Coruscanti survivors, the last Freed Ones were likewise preparing to leave.

Mara took a swig of water as she watched the others take a few moments rest. The vongforming of Coruscant had left the air barely breathable, the temperature humid and uncomfortable. The survivors they had come across were just barely getting by, the degrading air quality dealing a serious blow to their morale. The Wraiths Bhindi Drayson and Baljos Arnjak had already broken off and stayed behind with one of the larger groups of survivors, hoping to both gather intelligence and teach the others how to better survive until help arrived.

As the others took the moment of rest to glance about the ruined landscape, Mara couldn't help but overhear the distress in Danni's voice as she debated in low tones with Jaden, Jan, and Kyle.

"You still think we can end this war in a peaceful way?" Jaden said, a note of anger in his voice as he gestured towards the corpses of several children, huddled together in the lobby of a nearby burnt-out appartment. "After everything the Vong have done? After all the

people they've killed? They don't even know the meaning of mercy. Their word for peace is submission; what does that tell you about them? I know my Jedi training tells me otherwise, but it's hard not to think about them as a bunch of warmongering savages when I look at *that*."
"And what would *we* be if *we* tried to force the Yuuzhan Vong to submit to us?" Danni said, not backing down from the senior Jedi. "How would you like it if the entire galaxy viewed the Jedi through the actions of Vader or the Sith? Or believed this entire galaxy shared the same views as Borsk Fey'lya or Pwoe? Just because their leaders have led them down one path doesn't mean they're all bad. I mean, just look at the Freed Ones. War is all the Yuuzhan Vong know, all their leadership will respond to; but if we give them another option, a chance at a life outside of the endless circle of violence, wouldn't that be better?"
"Danni, their leaders hardly gave the people of Coruscant a chance," Jan said. She, like many others, had lost good friends when Coruscant fell, and didn't take kindly to watching her home galaxy go up in flames at the hands of religious fanatics. "Look around you. Sure we can take the high road and extend an offer of peace, but for the sake of the trillions who have already died, should we really let their murders go unpunished? If the only allies from their culture that we can get are the garbage men and gardeners, that's not saying much for the rest of their civilization. Who's to say they won't restart the war once they rebuild? If we want to make sure the Yuuzhan Vong aren't a threat anymore, a complete military victory is the only way."
"Master Katarn," Danni entreated the other Jedi Master. "Please tell me you don't believe that as well. The Yuuzhan Vong are people, just like you and me. Only they've been led astray by a few corrupt individuals. It's like the Empire when it was under the Emperor and Vader. Or the…"
Kyle held up a hand. "It's okay Danni. I agree with you. As someone who knows what the dark side truly feels like…" He trailed off and wrapped an arm around Jan. The pilot smiled whimsically at him and leaned against his chest. "I've done my fair share of thinking when it's come to this war. It's okay to feel angry about what the Yuuzhan Vong have done. Even enraged by the actions of their leaders. But we can't judge them as a whole. If even one or two of them want peace, then we should be open-minded enough to give them that opportunity. Perhaps, when enough of them see that peace is possible, the war can be ended without any further loss of life. It may just start with the garbage men and gardeners, but who knows where it will go from there. I may not share Danni's appreciation of their culture or

technology, but the Yuuzhan Vong should at least be given that chance. The New Republic and the Jedi Order sure don't want this war to continue. So if we can end it some other way, I'm all for it."
"There you go, being all Jedi-like again," Jan sighed, patting his arm. "You just might make a proper Jedi yet."
Mara's attention was directed elsewhere when Tahiri abruptly stood and peered into the darkness of the building they were camping out in front of.
"Tahiri?" Mara reached for her lightsaber hidden within her pack.
Tahiri didn't respond, instead the younger Jedi peeled off her Vong-face and took several steps past the threshold, into the building. Mara motioned for Kyle to take her place and hastily moved to the teen's side. "Tahiri, what's wrong?"
Tahiri was focused on something. No, not something, Mara realized; someone. Feeling her heart miss a beat, Mara saw the form of someone who eerily resembled a younger Anakin, slumped in a corner booth. A brief check on her apprentice revealed the heartbreak in Tahiri's eyes.
The blond teen took several rushed steps to the slumped figure, a hand frantically searching for a pulse. Almost at once, the figure stirred.
"Who…?"
"You're safe now," Tahiri whispered faintly, giving the young kid some of her food rations.
The boy ate the food greedily, as if he hadn't had any in a very long time. Once the food was gone, he stared at Tahiri and Mara in distrust.
"Who are you?"
"We're Jedi," Tahiri said. "Who are you?"
"Why should I tell you?"
"Because we told you who we are?" Mara said, raising an eyebrow.
The look on Mara's face appeared to have worked, because the boy cowed and answered Tahiri's question. "My name is Tarc. Tarc Kether."
"Why do you have his face?" Tahiri's voice came out in a broken whisper, her first sign of emotion in a long while.
Tarc regarded Tahiri inquisitively, intelligent blue eyes glittering. "You mean Anakin Solo's? That guy who was on the HoloNet?"
"Yes, him," Mara placed a comforting hand on Tahiri's shoulder.
"That guy ruined my life," Tarc said mutinously. "If it wasn't for him, my mother and sister would have been able to get off this rock. Now, they're both dead."
"How was he responsible?" Mara frowned.

"This woman, she said she was a senator, promised to get them off if I let her make me look like Anakin. She said I'd be well taken care of. Then, I overheard her receiving news that Anakin Solo had survived his mission. The next day, the senator said I wasn't needed any more and left me in the streets. I tried to find my family again, but the bombs had already started falling. I found their bodies in one of the queues that led to the escaping transport. An explosion had killed them all."
"This senator, her name wouldn't be Viqi Shesh?"
"That's her," Tarc grumbled. "So, my family's dead. I'm stuck on this planet. And I don't even have my face any more. All because that stupid Anakin Solo lived through whatever mission he was on. It'd be better off if he had just di…"
"You don't want to finish that sentence," Mara said quickly. Tahiri, however, had already turned away and stalked back out of the building.
"What's with her?"
"She was his girlfriend."
"'Was'?"
"Anakin Solo, the man you hate, my nephew, recently died." Mara said icily
Tarc's jaw snapped shut. But then he tilted his head back defiantly. "So who cares? If he had died sooner, I would be with my family on some other planet by now."
Mara inclined her head, fighting back less-than-Jedi-like feelings. In the end, she detached her water canteen and gave it to the boy. "Here. Try to stay out of the Vong's sight."
Tarc gripped the canteen tightly. "Fine. I see how it is. You Jedi are all the same. I hope the Vong-Jedi kills you then."
Mara had taken a few steps to leave, paused. "What?"
Tarc stood, smirking. He knew he would be able to use his knowledge as leverage to escape the planet. "The Vong-Jedi. It's like one of those scar heads, only she can do what you Jedi can. I saw her lift up a girl and snap her neck, and she didn't even touch her. Good luck with her."
"Oh, no," Mara shook her head. Using the Force, she lifted Tarc off the ground.
"Hey!"
"First tell me where this 'Vong-Jedi' is."
"Promise to take me with you when you leave this planet and I will." Tarc replied defiantly.
Mara saw a flicker of her deceased nephew in Tarc and her resolve flickered out. She set the boy back down and nodded. "If you tell us

where the Vong-Jedi is, I'll make sure you're on our escape flight out of here."
"Deal."
"Come on out. That way you only have to say it once."
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Palanhi System
Ganner Rhysode never truly considered himself heroic. Though it was an image he more than encouraged, he believed that the title of hero was reserved for people who had accomplished much greater than anything he was capable of.
Luke Skywalker, slayer of the first Death Star and the reason for the existence of the New Jedi Order: hero. Booster Terrik, a smuggler with a conscience who personally risks himself to save countless children: hero. Anakin Solo, co-founder of an entirely new order of Vong, Jedi extraordinaire, and master of impossible plans: hero. But he, Ganner Rhysode, blessed only with good looks and a quick tongue, was not.
It was with those thoughts in mind that he wondered why he was responding to the distress call he had received. He had been minding his own business and looking forward to his next interview with the Galactic Star, when its newly made chief reporter contacted him over the HoloNet. At first Ganner had been happy to hear from the Twi'lek reporter. But her news had quickly destroyed that happiness. Apparently, his success at wooing the audience of the Galactic Star had made it Peace Brigade target Number One. The Galactic Star's headquarters, located on the banking world of Palanhi, had already been subject to several firebombings.
But that wasn't the worst of it.
A delegation of Peace Brigaders, led by the Commander General Rinmek, had paid a visit to the president of the planet with an ultimatum. The president had five days to cease all aid to the New Republic forces at Borleias or the Yuuzhan Vong would see to it that someone with better judgment would take control of the system.
Strategically important for both its location and resources, the Palanhi system was an eleven planet system orbiting a yellow star. Of these planets, five provided a wide variety of minerals and raw materials, while several more provided tabanna or other useful gases. The people of Palanhi didn't process these raw goods, but instead sold them and the mining rights to other companies. This made the planet very rich. This surplus of resources was partially why the planet of Palanhi, third planet from the sun, had such a successful history as a banking planet. And where the banking sector prospered, so too did the other businesses on the planet. Local companies, such as the Galactic Star,

greatly benefited from this wealth as it enabled them to set up com-relays and ease connections throughout the Core and Colony worlds. This wealth enabled the people of Palanhi to afford a small fleet of the latest ships, and had allowed them to be one of the largest supporters of the forces holding Borleias. So with their wealth and mercenary armada, it looked at first as if the people of Palanhi were going to send the Peace Brigaders back to Ylesia in a box.

Unfortunately, a cabal of generals decided that the pro-New Republic president was needlessly endangering the people of Palanhi with his continued support of a doomed government, and decided that starting a civil war was the best option. A few assassinations and acts of terrorism later, and the forces loyal to the president were now facing off against the forces loyal to the generals, in a scene that was very much reminiscent of the recent fighting on Hapes. The main difference being that the resistance against the generals was being led by a force made up mostly of civilians and refugees. The president had only his personal guard on his side, which was the only reason why the president had control of the capital planet.

Now, with a Yuuzhan Vong capital ship several days out, the planet was in danger of completely going over to the Yuuzhan Vong. And that was bad news for more reasons than one. Situated on the Namadii Corridor—the same hyperspace route which the Pyria system was a part of—the threat of the Yuuzhan Vong and their allies, meant that not only was the aid coming out of the system in danger, but one of the main hyperspace routes with which the refugees were using to escape the Core and Colony worlds was also on the verge of being cut off. Which was why Ganner was initially puzzled as to what made the powers-to-be think he was the best choice for the job.

He asked and got an answer.

The explanation had been relatively simple.

There was just no one else available.

The first people they would have gone to to take care of the situation, Han and Leia, were out playing diplomats in the Vankalay system. The others were all similarly busy. Luke had to stay behind to help coordinate all things Force-related. Mara and Danni were on Coruscant. Lowbacca and Tesar were part of Wild Knight squadron with Master Saba Sebatyne as its leader. Corran Horn had renewed his position with Rogue Squadron. Jaina and Jacen were needed to bait the Vong. And Ganner's preferred hero of choice, Anakin Solo, had rejoined the Force.

"Time to step up and be the hero, Ganner," Ganner muttered as the blue lights of hyperspace snapped together and the darkness of real space filled his cockpit.
From what Pal'iva had told him, the generals held all the planets in the system save for the three closest to the sun, the third being the capital planet of Palanhi.
This was both good and bad.
Good, because with the full support of the capital planet, Ganner could hope to negotiate some type of cease fire or convince the generals of the error in their decision making.
Bad, because the four of the outer planets of the system were gas giants whose gravity profiles pulled any and all ships out of hyperspace. Said gas giants were also part of the 'other planets in the system' that the cabal of generals had control of.
As soon as he fully emerged from hyperspace, his astromech let out a screech of terror.
"A mine field?" Ganner said in disbelief, pulling hard on the pilot's yoke to avoid a collision. Of course the mine had to be one of the tracking kind. His random course to avoid the mine picked up another four. "Not fair!"
His astromech let out another squeal.
"I know that there's a missile lock on us! I can't do anything about it at the moment!" Ganner yelled, spotting a gunboat emerging from the swirl gas cloud of the planet off to his side.
The alarms of his X-wing blared, indicating the missile had been fired. Seeing the swirl mass of the gas giant above him, an idea came to him. Ganner sent his X-wing into a spinning, dizzying, climb, forcing the missile to slam into the collection of mines he had gathered. Before the explosion died, Ganner made a beeline for the gas giant the gunboat had emerged from. He hadn't sensed anyone else in the clouds, so hopefully he could get there and hide out and make the gunboat think that the blast had killed him.
He dove beneath the swirling mass of clouds. His sensors going dead from the interference of the heavily ionized atmosphere. He also nearly died of shock when he realized just what was below the cloud layer. The reason he hadn't been able to sense anyone was because these particular individuals couldn't be seen through the Force.
Several dozen rock-like ships were powered down within the swirls of gas. Or at least Ganner hoped they were powered down. There was no mistaking the profiles of several Yuuzhan Vong corvette analogs, three slave ships, a frigate, and five troop transports.
"They're already here," Ganner groaned, leaning back in his seat.

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Borleias

Jaina dismounted from the ladder and stepped away from her fighter. Waiting for her at the exit to the hangar was the last person she wanted to see.

"Zekk," Jaina said curtly and walked right past him. Though they had had several meals together, as fellow Twin Suns pilots of course, and had normalized their friendship, Anakin's death had remained her just how painful relationships could be. Especially Jedi relationships. The last thing she wanted was for Zekk to break her heart, or worse, for her to break his. If they weren't together, her death wouldn't hurt him as badly, and his wouldn't hurt her.

Or at least that's what she tried to convince herself.

Wartime was no place for romance anyways.

"Goddess," Zekk said, taking several strides to catch up. She could see the hurt in his eyes at her dismissal.

"Do you not have duties to attend to?" Jaina said coolly, not slowing her pace at all.

"Lowie's covering for me."

"So what do you want?" They entered her quarters.

"Goddess…Jaina. Would you just stop for a second!"

Jaina stopped, staring straight ahead. "What?"

"What do you think? You're the goddess." Zekk said bitterly.

"I don't have times for games, Zekk," Jaina tried to make herself sound as cold as possible.

"Look, I know you're hurting because of Anakin. I get that. But that doesn't mean you have to shut everyone out!"

"Zekk," Jaina closed her eyes to reinforce her mental barriers. "My brother's death just reminded me that there is a war being fought. None of us have time for personal relationships; especially not now, when people are dying by the thousands every day. Time spent kissing, hugging, dating, is time better spent planning and fighting. We can't keep living in a fantasy world. We've grown up, moved on from what we once had. Or at least I have. Relationships are a distraction. One I don't need."

"So that's how it is then?" The disbelief in Zekk's voice was clear. "I don't buy that Jaina. Your tough-girl routine may fool others, but not me."

"Then too bad!" Jaina snapped, whirling onto Zekk, brown eyes flashing. "You don't have any family, so you wouldn't understand how much it hurts to lose a part of it!"

"I don't have to have a family to know what losing one feels like," Zekk said. Jaina hated the sympathetic tone of his voice. "You can reinforce your mental barriers all you want, but we've been best friends for too long for that to work. I felt it when you thought Jacen was dead. I feel it now, with Anakin's death. No matter how much you fear another death. No matter how much you fear your death will hurt others. I'm willing to risk it. *I* am not going anywhere, Jaina."
"Well you should!" Jaina shouted, throwing her arms out in exasperation. She no longer had any tears to cry, nor did she want to continue the conversation any further. But she couldn't stop herself, the words continued to come like a dam had burst in her chest. "Because when you lose someone you love, it hurts, Zekk! Hurts more than anything! And I couldn't stop this *kriffing* war from taking my little brother! And if I couldn't save him, who knows what else could happen? Just forget about me. It isn't smart caring for someone who will just die anyways."
"When have I ever done the smart thing?" Zekk said, stepping forward. Jaina held out a hand to keep him at a distance
"You're only making this harder. Just let me go. It's not worth it. It never is." Jaina gritted out.
"It is to me."
Jaina took a step back further into her room, shaking her head. She tried to keep her face as cold and emotionless as possible. "I…I can't do it, Zekk. I...I just can't."
Zekk let out a breath, and Jaina turned her back to him. "Jaina."
"Just go. Please. Zekk. If our friendship ever meant anything to you. Go."
Zekk hesitated, exhaled, then nodded wearily. He was tired of fighting a fight when it was clear Jaina had already given up. "Alright, Jaina. Alright."
His shoulders slumped, the door to her room slid close, and Zekk walked away.
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Jacen ignored the emotional overflow coming from his sister as he focused on Vergere's instructions. There was something about Anakin's death that didn't sit right with Jacen. Jacen knew he wasn't in denial. He had experiences with being cut from the Force when he had been held on Coruscant. Just because Anakin had disappeared from the Force, didn't necessarily mean he was dead. When he approached Vergere's cell and asked her about it, if there was someone else capable of removing someone from the Force, Vergere had just tilted

her head and smiled. Though she didn't answer, she did recommend he meditate on the issue.
"How would you, who rely on the Force to see, see someone who has been removed from the Force? You say he may be alive. But if one is removed from the Force, are they not dead? The Force, according to your Jedi teachings, exists only in all living things."
"But you removed me from the Force, yet I still lived."
"Were you truly living? Maybe you are dead and have yet to come back to life." Vergere chortled at that. *"So tell me, Jacen Solo. If you were removed from the Force, yet still live. If the Yuuzhan Vong are outside the Force but still live. What does that say about what you have learned about the Force?"*
"That Master Skywalker and the others are wrong?"
"That is one conclusion. Your brother came to another by his own self."
*"Then he **is** alive?"*
"If it is as you believe, that he has been simply removed from the Force and not slain. How would you find him? How would you find anything that you cannot see with the Force?"
"Vongsense."
"Tell me, do you think you can find a single presence through the galaxy, using that which you have only begun to learn?"
"Do or do not, there is no try."
"Quaint words from a quaint era. See to it that you 'do' then, Jacen Solo."
Anakin had disappeared in the Force, yes. But as the Yuuzhan Vong and Vergere had proven, there were things even Jedi couldn't see.
"First, make yourself small. You will discover things you would not have been able to when you were big. Just as an insect crawling at your feet sees the intricate structures of every grain of sand, so too will you see the complexities of the Force. Start small and a world you never knew will open to you."
Jacen shrunk his Force presence down, slowing his breathing, his heart rate. As he did, he could 'hear' the background noise of the Force. It was as if his initial presence had been so loud, it had drowned out these other sounds; like city-lights blotting out the glow of the stars above.
He made himself smaller, quieting his mind. Soon, he could hear voices from the adjacent rooms.
Not voices, Jacen corrected; thoughts.
Soldiers worrying about the next attack. One wondering what the mid-day meal was going to be. Another fearing the remaining Freed Ones

now that the 'scarred-headed bitch' wasn't here to keep them in check. It was a continuous bombardment of thoughts, loud and unnerving. Jacen frowned as he focused on these 'voices', narrowing his presence. Immediately, he began to feel baser emotions from the soldiers he was 'listening' in on. Hatred, fear, greed, hunger.

Purely on a whim, Jacen wondered what would happen if he gave one of the soldiers a nudge. The courage to act on his feelings.

Immediately, he heard an exclamation from the other room. "That settles it! I'm going to General Antilles and demand he space those scarheads! We're supposed to kill them, not make nice to them!"

"Don't be stupid Gavrik. The general's buddy-buddies with the Jedi. There's no way he'll do that."

"Fine. Then I'll take care of those scar-heads myself!"

Jacen jerked in surprise, frightened at how large an effect just a little nudge had created. He analyzed his actions and came to a sober realization that he had given that soldier a nudge not on the conscious level, but on a much more primal level. The nudge had amplified the man's feelings so that his hate overcame reason. Jacen tried to reach out and undo that push he had given the soldier, but found that he couldn't. Hate had taken over the entire soldier's being. It was as if Jacen had just driven the man insane.

Jacen hastily touched the minds of nearby guards, to be on alert for this maddened soldier, and the soldier was quickly detained.

Heart thumping, Jacen made himself large again, and the thoughts that were entering the room were once again drowned out by his own.

"Why didn't you warn me?" Jacen said aloud.

"So you could learn, of course. Being as small as you were, you could have even entered the mind of a Jedi, and they would not have realized your presence. Do not worry about the soldier, I will undo the damage you inflicted."

"Have you done that? Enter the minds of Jedi?"

"Again," Vergere ignored him. *"This time, be small and be Yuuzhan Vong."*

"Use Vongsense? If you say so."

Jacen closed his eyes again, once again making himself small in the Force. He compressed his powerful Force essence, made all the more stronger by his absorption of the Force nexus of the Old Jedi Temple, and refined it. Again, the thoughts of the people around him came into the room. He wasn't in their minds, their thoughts were loud enough that the Force carried them. Like a stopper pulled out from a drain, the thoughts swirled towards the void left by Jacen's smaller presence. Then, all was silent.

Jacen exhaled in and out as the slaveseed buried within his chest pulsated. In his mind's eye, the world that he knew melted away. Unlike when he was accessing the Force, where thoughts and presences poured towards him like water, the world seen through Vongsense was deathly calm.
Instead, in the stillness, swirls of darkness moved about. They were empty pockets in the Force were none should exist. Abscesses that stood out simply by being.
Mentally, Jacen made his way to those voids, these shapes that just exuded wrongness. Jacen stopped at the nearest swirl of darkness and reached out an ethereal hand.
His hand passed through the void, as if both it and his hand existed on two different spectrums.
These were the Freed Ones out in the courtyard, he concluded, judging by how close they were to his amplified 'sight'.
Jacen turned his gaze towards Pyria VI and the Vong presence there. It was much harder to do than before, especially while staying small. His natural instinct was to make his Force presence as big as possible to help him reach the distant moon. It was the difference between taking one step or a thousand.
He soothed his mind once more and tried again. This time, the missing pockets within the Force were distant pinpricks. So small that he would have missed them had he not been looking for them. Unlike when he was big and could actually see the massive outlines of the vessel, even from planet-side, it was as if this fleet was so far away it was a part of the darkness of space that surrounded it.
He needed to get closer.
Closer.
The cavities within the Force grew in size; like gaping holes in the fabric of the Force. He could see the emptiness left by whole ships; once again not because they stood out in any way, but because of what their presence canceled out. The Force, so alive and vibrant in the back of his mind, was completely missing from these dark swirling patches that were the Yuuzhan Vong ships.
Suddenly, someone shook him and brought him out of his trance. When Jacen opened his eyes, he found himself on a medical bed, with Master Cilghal and Skywalker standing over him, concerned.
"What's wrong?" Jacen couldn't help but feel slightly annoyed.
"That's what I would like to ask you," Luke raised an eyebrow. "Your Force presence just about disappeared on us and it sent Jaina into a panic."

Slightly peeved, Jacen did his best to answer calmly. "I was trying a new meditation technique. To see the Yuuzhan Vong with my Vongsense. I was in no danger."
"If you could, please give us a warning next time," Cilghal said gently. "You have many people who care for you. After the loss of your brother, losing you would hurt even more."
"I'll try, Master Cilghal. Thank you." Jacen offered up his father's smile to reassure the two. He debated telling them that he didn't believe Anakin was dead, but decided against it. Unless he had proof, he wasn't going to give anyone false hope.
When Cilghal and Luke left. Jacen closed his eyes and reached out with just his usual Vongsense. It was then that he had made a startling discovery.
The Vong he had sensed on the planet using his enhanced Vongsense, the ones he had assumed to be the Freed Ones and scouts for the Vong invasion force, were different than the ones he was seeing now. And the fleet at Pyria VI was not the same fleet he had had strained to sense earlier.
"What?" Jacen whispered to himself in confusion.
"To focus your mind and make yourself small, did I not tell you you would see things you normally wouldn't? Now that you are big again, stretch your 'Vongsense' across this planet."
With some amount of effort, Jacen increased his range. He abruptly pulled back out in shock. He had felt the group of Yuuzhan Vong warriors that he had initially sensed with his enhanced Vongsense, but they were not where he had expected. "They were on the opposite side of the planet!"
"And the fleet you sensed was in another system." Jacen could hear Vergere chuckle in his mind.
"By making myself small, I could see greater distances than usual," Jacen said slowly to himself, reclining back on the medical bed he had been placed on. "But I couldn't see things that were nearby. While big, I can see things nearby, but it requires more effort to see things further away. Being small is like viewing things through a telescope. Things nearby are blurry, so we ignore them. But we can see things that are at great distances just fine."
"Congratulations." Vergere's voice contained an emotion Jacen couldn't recognize, maybe it was pride. *"You have just taken one step further towards embracing your destiny."*
(0) *(0)*
Coruscant

The trap was a perfect one. Wraith Squadron had set up all sorts of nasty surprises in the abandoned lobby of what was once a hotel. The building itself had stretched high into the sky. That was, before a Yuuzhan Vong coralskipper pilot got bored and blasted apart the first hundred levels or so. Now all that was left of the hotel were four walls, a door way, and a rubble filled mound. The members of Wraith Squadron, plus Jan and a terrified Tarc, were all spread out in the surrounding structures, ready to supply supportive fire if needed.
The Jedi members of the group all had the fun role as both hunter and bait. They would attract the attention of this Force-sensitive Vong that Tarc mentioned, and lead it back to the kill zone. Hopefully, once it was dead, they'd find a ride off of Coruscant and return to Borleias before the week was out.
"Something else is down here," Tahiri whispered into her comlink. The blond teen was carefully walking down one of the elevated walkways that led deeper into the planet's undercity.
"Something else?" Mara replied.
"I can't describe it," Tahiri breathed.
"Clear your mind, Tahiri. Then reach out again. What do you feel?"
Tahiri exhaled and did her best to do as she was told. Steadying herself, Tahiri once again felt her surroundings. Cold, dark, and lifeless. Before she could stop herself, memories and feelings came crashing down on her like a tidal wave.
Tahiri staggered, gasping for air. She vaguely heard Mara call out to her over the comlink. Despair and pain on par with what she had felt with Anakin's death were ravaging her mind. Her green eye bulging, she fell to her hands and knees.
A word that would have been alien to her had she not been shaped, echoed in her mind.
Submit!
"Impossible," Tahiri rasped, sweat pouring down her face and mixing with her tears. "It can't be."
SUBMIT!
"NO!" Tahiri screeched, head jerking up as she yelled at the shadows. Despite the pain, she tried to pick herself up.
Then DIE!
Tahiri abruptly collapsed to her stomach and clutched at her throat as a powerful pressure wrapped around her neck. Breathing became impossible, the world around dimming. And just as suddenly, the pressure was released. Taking in greedy gulps of air, Tahiri stared up at the towering buildings all around; a feeling of detachment and loss settling over her.

A hand placed itself on her forehead, and the melancholy sensations faded away as if blown by a gentle breeze. The world came back into focus.
Blinking, Tahiri followed the arm connected to the hand back to its owner. "Mara?"
"You okay, Tahiri?" Mara only glanced briefly at her apprentice before returning her gaze to the surrounding shadows.
Tahiri closed her eyes and started to shake her head. Then, realizing that she didn't want to appear weak or distracted, as several people thought she would be due to Anakin's passing, she nodded. "I'm fine."
More footsteps as both Jaden and Kyle came into view.
"What happened?" Kyle looked to Mara for an answer.
"I don't know."
"Was it the Vong-Jedi?" Jaden asked.
"In a way, I guess it was *a* Vong-Jedi," Tahiri said tiredly.
"Tahiri?"
"You remember in the briefing how I told you guys all about Lord Nyax and how Alema crushed his brain?"
"You said he was still alive though," Kyle pointed out.
"Alive and worse than before," Tahiri murmured. "He spoke to me in my head in Yuuzhan Vong. If I had to guess, after we wounded him, the Vong captured, healed, and shaped him."
"I thought the Shapers are banned from doing that research. Anakin reported that Mezhan Kwaad's experiments on you were against their beliefs." Jaden mentioned.
'It didn't stop her from turning me into a Jedi-Vong, did it?" Tahiri said bitterly. "If a rogue shaper altered Lord Nyax. Then maybe he or she is responsible for the Vong-Jedi too."
"Tahiri," Mara said gently.
"Sorry," Tahiri bowed her head. "It's just. You guys could very well have been hunting me if it wasn't for Anakin. I would have been just like Lord Nyax; a science experiment gone wrong. I would have known only that the Jedi were my enemies and that I had to kill them."
The three older Jedi did their best to send their reassurance to the emotionally battered teen. Tahiri offered them a brave smile in turn, but her eyes remained haunted.
"Are you sure you're up to this?" Kyle asked kindly. "You can always back up the Wraiths if it's too much for you."
"No, I can do this," Tahiri said instantly. "I just wasn't expecting Lord Nyax again. He was a lot stronger and more focused than I remember."
"Probably due to the shaping," Mara guessed. "And if he's also down here, then we need to be extra careful. One out-of-control Force-

sensitive Yuuzhan Vong we might have been able to handle. But Lord Nyax only complicates things."
"Should we scrub the mission?" Jaden said. "We've already dropped off the necessary Wraiths and all the Freed Ones to their positions. We can just leave them and return to Borleias."
"We'll have to deal with these Vong-Jedi sooner or later," Kyle said. "And if they become any more powerful, they may become a real danger not just to the people of Coruscant, but to the galaxy. Can you imagine the damage they'll cause if they find a way off this planet?"
"Do we stick to the plan then?" Jaden looked to his former master.
Kyle deferred to the other master in the group. "Mara, do you think the trap will work for the both of them?"
"Only if we can lure both and hold them there," Mara said, glancing back towards the devastated hotel. "If we aren't careful and they break free, the Wraiths will be in real danger."
"Then we focus on them one at a time," Kyle decided. "And since this 'Lord Nyax,' decided to show himself first, we'll take him down first. We'll call Wraith Squadron to relocate some of their traps."
"Do you know how we can find Lord Nyax?" Jaden asked Tahiri.
Tahiri shook her head. "The last time he was after the Force nexus beneath the Jedi Temple. But Jacen absorbed most of it. With his head half Yuuzhan Vong now, I don't know what he'll be after."
Studying Tahiri, Kyle inclined his head. "I might have an idea."
Mara, sensing Kyle's intentions glanced sharply at him. "You want to use her as bait?"
Nodding slowly, Kyle motioned to Tahiri. "Lord Nyax attacked her specifically, even though we were all close enough to feel his Force presence. It's possible he recognized her from when she was first here and has a grudge against her."
"I'll do it." Tahiri said, before Mara could object.
"Tahiri…"
"Mara, I know that it's a risk. But now that I've felt how strong he's become. I know I can take whatever he can throw at me. I'm a Jedi-Vong, remember? Pain is my specialty."
"You're a Jedi with Vong memories forcibly put inside her head," Mara corrected. "And you are my apprentice."
"Do you have another idea then?" Tahiri countered. "The longer we wait, the chance grows that he's hurting someone else or retreating deeper into the undercity."
Mara clenched her jaw. "No. But know this, Tahiri. Anakin may have died, but there are others who still care about you. Me being one of

them. It will hurt me just as bad if anything happens to you too, so be careful."
Tahiri stared at Mara for several long seconds, her green eyes defrosting ever so slightly. In the end, Tahiri looked back down the darkened pathway. "No promises, Mara. No promises."
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Borleias
The Yuuzhan Vong commander of the forces attacking the New Republic base on Borleias was none-other than Czulkang Lah, the father of Warmaster Tsavong Lah, and a teacher of many Yuuzhan Vong warriors. He had experienced war much his life, had seen many tactics, tricks, and traps. But what he could not understand was how the Twin Suns squadrons were continuing to bypass the dovin basals of his ships.
It was becoming more frequent now. The infamous fighter squadron would fire missiles at his ship. The first would explode before contact, spraying the yorik coral with superheated debris. The rest would fly through unopposed by the ship's voids.
There were whispers among the priestly and warrior caste, supported by rumors from their agents on planet, that Jaina Solo was indeed Yun-Harla. That it was her power that was suppressing the dovin basals. When one such priest adjunct of Yun-Harla dared to voice this view in his presence, Czulkang promptly put the fool onto the next ship into the front lines.
He was now staring at the rapidly cooling wreck of that ship. Its lifeless form floating in several pieces. Apparently the priest hadn't been pious enough to gain the protection of his goddess.
In the distance, the forward elements of his fleet were now skirmishing with the New Republic ships. They outnumbered the infidel fleet, so their main goal was to simply reduce as many craft as possible. War of attrition was not how Czulkang wanted to win, but it would be a victory nonetheless. As proven by his first attack, he could not afford to send large elements of his fleet and expect them to come back alive. At least not against the person currently commanding the New Republic forces.
Czulkang knew that the New Republic general on Borleias was a crafty one. He had had their allies from the Peace Brigade tell him all about this 'Antilles' person. It was best to learn about your opponent before attacking him after all. When he first heard the tales, he had been certain the Peace Brigade members had been exaggerating. But when Antilles brought in his massive triangle capital ship and proceeded to bombard the jungle all around his base from orbit, thus vaporizing

nearly every single Yuuzhan Vong warrior that had been on the planet's surface, Czulkang realized that there may have been some truth to the tales after all.
After the annihilation of the Yuuzhan Vong ground forces, the Yuuzhan Vong commander was now more than a little wary of any further tricks or traps. First on his mind was what Antilles was calling the 'Starlancer Project.' After learning of the infidels' penchant for building planet and sun-destroying weapons, Czulkang was concerned that this new project of Antilles could accomplish a similar feat. The concerns were amplified when he received a report that these Starlancer fighters had fired off a beam that struck one of their ships on Coruscant.
In order to have any hope of victory against this general, he had to turn the conditions of the battle back to his favor. Since his arrival, it had been General Antilles who had been dictating the terms on which they fought. Even going so far as to draw all the Yuuzhan Vong in to destroy them in a single bombardment. It was now time to change things. To force Antilles to fight when the human didn't want to.
"Charat," Czulkang said, turning away from the burning wreck as it floated pass their ship.
"Great Master?" Charat Kraal, survivor of the initial New Republic invasion, had been standing behind Czulkang since being summoned.
"Form up your wing. I will give you a chance to restore your domain's honor. You will be destroying the 'pipe-fighters' before they can reach their full potential. Since Jaina Solo will no doubt be protecting them, I expect you to kill her as well."
"It will be done," Charat Kraal clasped a hand to his breastplate, bowed his head, and then walked hastily out of the bridge.
Czulkang returned to his contemplations. Trying to detect what scheme Antilles had in store for him this time. Sending Charat and the remains of domain Kraal was more strategic than an act of benevolence on Czulkang's part. Domain Kraal had already failed to defeat Antilles numerous times, so the skills of their warriors, and their commander, were in doubt. Should they succeed in destroying the pipe-fighters, Czulkang could then proceed with his own attack, no longer having to fear a planet-destroying weapon. Should they fail in destroying the superweapon, Czulkang believed that Domain Kraal was at least skilled enough to force the pipe-fighters to utilize their weapons. He could then see firsthand it effectiveness without the loss of any vital element of his force and plan accordingly.
Either way, he would benefit and the New Republic forces would suffer. Despite his positive conclusion of all possible outcomes. Czulkang knew that the battle would be far from over. Even though he had

informed his prideful son that any victory at Borleias would be too costly, and any defeat a disaster for the Yuuzhan Vong, Tsavong Lah was determined to crush the *Jeedai* and the New Republic forces. It saddened Czulkang that his son had forgotten one of the key rules of battle: You never corner your enemy completely, for they are always the most dangerous when death is their only option.

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"Twin Suns Leader to the Rogues and Wild Knights, we'll be knee deep in Vong in a moment. It looks like their commander is finally making a run on the pipe-fighters. Are either of your squadrons in a position to help out?"

"Rogues will be with you shortly. Just finishing up a very stubborn Vong cruiser."

"Wild Knightz will be with you az well, Goddess," Saba Sebatyne chimed in.

Jaina switched to an open channel. "Control, this is Yun-Harla. Inform General Antilles that a smarter group of Vong have decided to attack before we're ready. The pipe-fighters will not be in position or ready to fire for another ten minutes. The Vong will be all over us in that time."

"General Antilles requests that you hold your position until backup arrives. We cannot allow the Vong to take out the pipe-fighters, it's our only chance of a victory."

'General Antilles requests,' Jaina still didn't know if she would ever get used to the preferential treatment and 'requests' she received from her superior officers, due to her role as a goddess. Even after two months of being 'asked' to do something or 'if it pleased her' someone else had her permission to do something, Jaina still felt awkward. Not that the Vong could see it now that she was in her X-wing.

"Looks like the general was right," Kyp's voice broke up Jaina's musings. *"Someone is listening in on the open frequency."*

Jaina checked her sensors and saw what Kyp had been referring to. The approaching element of the Vong fleet had been moving slowly, cautiously, towards them and the pipe-fighters. Only seconds after her open broadcast, the Vong fleet was now moving at full speed. The code word used, 'smarter Vong,' was an indicator that the Vong commander hadn't gone all in yet, but was sending a smaller force to test their capabilities. It also indicated that the pipe-fighters were going to return to their hangar on Borleias to be used as bait for another day. Of course, the Twin Suns squadron now had to buy enough time for the pipe-fighters to perform those maneuvers.

"Form up to your shield-trios and do what we've practiced, Twin Suns," Jaina commanded, pulling the chin-strap of her flight helmet back into position.
Spawned from one of Jag's ideas, Jaina had had the members of Twin Suns drill continuously to synchronize their laser fire. Not only would this bypass the void defenses of Vong ships, but it also created better unit cohesion and forced the members of the squadron to know each other a little better. The fact that there was at least one Force sensitive for every shield-trio, with the exception of her own, which had both her and Kyp, meant that the timing of her squadron could be even more accurate and deadly.
Though it appeared that there were only three X-wing squadrons protecting the pipe-fighters, there were several dozen ships waiting to micro-jump to their location at a moment's notice. All the fighters had to do was wait for the Vong to get close enough.
That in itself didn't take long.
"First wave of coralskippers, collapse their formation and pound them from the sides," Jaina said. "Take the next wave head-on."
Twin Suns squadron quickly veered off as the enemy neared, going over, under, and to the sides of the first wave of coralskippers. The coralskippers also split up, latching onto the tails of each of the four shield-trios. The Twin Suns fighters promptly banked hard toward each other in a well-practiced maneuver that put the coralskippers firing on another shield-trio right in their sights.
The crisscross, zigzag maneuvers not only confused the pilots of the coralskippers, but even caused a collision as well. The rest of the coralskippers were lit up with laser fire with every zig and zag. The members of each Twin Suns shield-trio trusted the others to clear their tails, as they cleared another tail in turn. Within seconds of the engagement beginning, there was nothing but floating coralskipper parts drifting in space.
"Second wave, incoming," Jag said efficiently.
"Second wave, confirmed. Watch out for the corvette analogs in support. Fire at the skips head on, then break."
"This is shield-trio four. Ten speaking. Permission to try a plan out of Little Brother's book?"
Jaina's jaw clenched at Zindra's request. "If it doesn't get you three killed. Permission granted."
"Please give us a few moments of cover."
"You'll have it."
The other nine fighters of Twin Suns quickly formed up again and exchanged fire with the oncoming coralskippers. Additional laser fire

and missiles were provided as Rogue Squadron and the Wild Knights joined the battle.
In the meantime, the Yuuzhan Vong corvette analogs began laying down a sheet of suppressing fire, covering their fighters with accurate plasma fire. They were aligned in a row, their broadsides firing relentlessly as they tried to box in the battle zone.
Sneaking below the dogfight, Zindra, Teelath Keer, and former Kyp's Dozen member Ryza Tyreed, moved to flank the line of corvettes. Using the concepts similar to the Shadow Bomb, they were keeping the light from their engines almost non-existent by using the momentum of small bursts to propel them unseen towards the vessels. The power in their cockpits was also shut off to further minimize risk of detection, the pilots relying on their mag-sealed suits to keep them alive.
The corvette they were approaching was on the tail-end of the line of five Yuuzhan Vong capital ships. Its gunners were more concerned with the active New Republic fighters and didn't see three drifting heaps of metal approach.
When the three fighters were close enough to the 'engine-equivalent' of the corvette, they promptly filled it with a payload of Shadow Bombs.
The X-wings then quickly powered up their engines and veered away as fast as they could. Just as the corvette's plasma weaponry spun around to target them, the bombs exploded in a massive fireball that ripped the back of the ship into shreds. The force of the blast also sent what was left of the ship hurling towards a neighboring corvette; which shook violently from the impact of the massive coral-projectile and spun out of control.
Before the second ship's dovin basal could compensate for the spin, the ship plowed into the back of a third, mortally wounding it; and both splintered apart like shattered trees, bits and pieces flying everywhere.
The remaining two corvettes had enough of a warning to pull away from the errant trajectories of their badly damaged brethren, but were forced to stop their suppressing fire to do so. In a matter of moments, the rest of the Twin Suns, Rogues, and Wild Knights polished off the coralskipper contingent.
Jaina watched the remaining two corvettes retreat back to the approaching Vong capital ships with a sad grin on her face. "That was out of Little Brother's playbook, huh?"
"We improvised a bit, Goddess." Zindra came back sheepishly.
"If you keep downing ships that size, the painters are going to run out of room on your X-wing." Jaina said. "Are the three of you all right?"

"I'm venting atmosphere and pretty crispy, engines and ejection system are dead too. Twin Suns Eleven's lost an S-foil, and Twelve did that usual Jedi thing and avoided getting damaged."
"Alright, stay put until we can get a shuttle to you."
"Would love to, but my momentum has me on a ballistic course towards the Vong fleet."
Jaina felt her blood run cold at that. Despite Zindra's brave words, the young pilot was obviously scared out of her mind. "Twin Suns Twelve, think you can use the Force to slow her?"
"I'm trying that as we speak, Goddess," Ryza's voice was strained with effort. *"I'm not the strongest at telekinesis though."*
"Control, we need a shuttle to pick up a disabled craft on the double. The rest of the Vong force is going to be here in a minute and she's about twenty seconds out from their guns!" Jaina couldn't help but feel the same panic Zindra was feeling. This was someone who had used one of Anakin's tactics with great success. Who had honored him with her reckless decision that probably saved lives. If anyone deserved to live, it was her. "If you can't get anyone out here, request permission to engage the rest of the Vong fleet. At least I can give them something else to shoot at."
"Goddess, the Mon Mothma is jumping in. Permission to engage, granted."
Jaina felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. "Rogue Leader, Wild Knight Leader, care to join me?"
"It would be an honor, Goddess," Gavin replied. As a longtime pilot, he could understand the thoughts going through Jaina's mind. If they could save a fellow pilot after that pilot just saved them, they would.
"Wild Knights will be hanging back to cover your rear."
"Twin Suns Ten, hang in there," Jaina said, pushing her X-wing's speed to its limits. "We're not going to let you die just yet."
"That'd be great. Thanks," Zindra said faintly. *"Groundside I owe all of you a blue milk."*
"Blue milk?" Jaina could see a fresh wave of coralskippers detach from the Vong capital ships.
"Blame Anakin for starting that tradition."
"You have got to tell me that story. So make sure you live long enough to do so." Jaina began firing her lasers, even though they were still too far away to do any damage. She succeed, though, in attracting the attention of the Vong cruiser and its fighter escort.
A second later, the *Mon Mothma* and several supporting vessels dropped into real space right next to the Vong cruiser. Laser and plasma flared as the massive ships began their duel.

"Looks like I get to live another day."
"Looks like you do," Jaina breathed, finally relaxing and refocusing herself on the new battle breaking out.
(0) *(0)*
Jagged Fel was making adjustments to his clawcraft; mostly synchronizing the systems on one of the wings to the other, since the previous systems were damaged by plasma fire. The synchronization of the weapons system was especially important due to the precision needed to keep up with his two Force-sensitive shield-trio members. He climbed down from the upper half of the starboard wing and found Shawnkyr Nuruodo waiting for him on the ground.
A Chiss officer, she'd been his wingmate on his first trip into New Republic space at the start of the Yuuzhan Vong crisis, his sole partner during his recent return, and his second-in-command when he'd flown on Hapes. Now, while he flew with Twin Suns Squadron, she led Vanguard Squadron out of the *Mon Mothma*. He had nothing but the greatest of respect for her; especially since she had chosen to follow him back into New Republic space the second time, despite all the reports they had been receiving at that time had indicated that the New Republic had been in full retreat.
"Major?"
"Colonel."
"There is something on your mind?"
"Yes, sir." Shawnkyr seemed to search for the right words. "I think… Colonel, I think it is time for us to leave."
Jag stopped wiping his hands on a greasy towel and raised an eyebrow. "Explain."
"Colonel, we came back to New Republic space with a clear and specific plan; to evaluate the threat the Yuuzhan Vong pose to Chiss society. We've had time to make that evaluation. Now we should report back with our findings."
Jag was slow to answer. He had to admit that he had been thinking similar thoughts as the events on Borleias continued to unfold. This wasn't the Chiss' war yet. It wasn't his war. What reason did he have to stay and back a government that was crumbling from the inside as well as the outside?
His gaze took him past Shawnkyr to where Jaina was likewise fine tuning her own starfighter. He wasn't Force-sensitive, and he was no expert on the opposite gender, so he had no idea if the leader of their squadron returned his feelings or not. Her relationship with the other Jedi had yet to advance beyond mere friendship, at least to his knowledge. In fact, they had more or less stopped interacting since

Anakin Solo's death. Zekk had even transferred out of Twin Suns squadron.
Jag was not an expert at relationships, but he could definitely read body language. And from what he could tell of Jaina's, she was hurting, badly. He wondered why Zekk, with all his Force abilities, hadn't done more.
"Colonel?"
Jag blinked, then realized that Shawnkyr was looking in the direction he was. Clearing his throat, Jag leaned back against his fighter and folded his arms in front of him. "If we were to return to high command, what would our report contain?"
Ever the professional, Shawnkyr made no mention of where his gaze had and still lingered, and answered his question. "That the Yuuzhan Vong are a significant threat to us, to the Empire, to any societal structure that does not resemble theirs. That the New Republic is shattering on all fronts, and that it is only a matter of time before the Yuuzhan Vong mop up here and spread out to reach us."
"I agree with your conclusions."
"Then let's go."
He shook his head. "I've come to additional conclusions that suggest we should stay."
"May I hear them?"
"We have been fortunate enough that the defenses of Borleias are commanded by General Antilles. His strategic knowledge and experience has given us a clear view of the tactics the Yuuzhan Vong will employ, and at the same time allows us to stay alive and appreciate what we have learned. But so far, the Yuuzhan Vong have fought on his terms. Only in seeing how this campaign plays out can we provide a definitive analysis of the enemy that our people will someday face."
"So it is your plan to return to Chiss space immediately upon the fall of Borleias."
"That is a possibility, yes."
"A possibility?"
"I did not describe all my conclusions," Jag said, looking away from Jaina's X-wing as its pilot left the hangar. "A second one, slightly related to the first. The Yuuzhan Vong are coming from their home galaxy with a finite number of forces. Though they have overwhelmed the New Republic, any force that survives will be a threat to the Chiss Ascendancy. If we can assist the New Republic in the elimination of as many Yuuzhan Vong as possible, we will be preserving both Chiss

material and life in the future. Any damage we do here is damage the enemy cannot when they do reach us."
"So you will not leave at all."
"I will leave…eventually."
He watched Shawnkyr carefully as she considered his words in silence. She momentarily turned from him and in the direction of Jaina's X-wing, her shoulders slumping nearly imperceptibly as she gazed at the fightercraft. It was relatively late in the night, and there were no other beings within the hangar, leaving an empty stillness between the two.
"May I speak frankly? Pilot to pilot?"
"Always."
"Colonel…Jagged…does your decision have anything to do with your feelings for Jaina Solo? She has already rejected you…"
"You are wrong there," Jag interrupted. "It was I who broke things off so that she could discover where her heart truly lay. The fact that she has yet to court the other Jedi means…"
"What?" Now it was Shawnkyr's turn to interrupt, turning to face him. "Jagged, we have been wingmates for a long time now. We have known each other even longer. I know you. You are a great pilot and I am proud to be considered one of your friends. You value strength and duty, as well as loyalty. You make decisions for the greater good based on logical, factual values, not emotion. It is why I am concerned about you and the state Jaina Solo has left you in. You are not the type of person to be left begging at a table for scraps of affection. You would not normally throw away your duty to our people for one woman. Nor would you make decisions that could affect our people because of what one woman *might* feel for you. If the two of you were engaged romantically, I…I might have taken that aspect into consideration. But the two of you are just wingmates, nothing more."
Jag fell silent, gazing at the distance X-wing illuminated by a single cone of light from a fixture above. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Shawnkyr waiting expectantly. Flickers of apprehension, that only someone who knew her well could see, danced across her face. Once again he was reminded of her steadfast loyalty to him.
He would not dismiss her opinions without a second thought. She was right, she did know him well. But at the same time, she didn't know all of him. How could she when he too was only just discovering a side of himself that he hadn't known existed.
Though he had returned to New Republic space under the pretense of analyzing the Yuuzhan Vong threat, in truth, he had done so for a more selfish reason. He had been brought up with Chiss societal values, trained to think a certain way. But getting to know Wedge Antilles and

a whole new side of his family had changed things. He wasn't solely loyal to the Chiss anymore. Yet, he also wasn't part of the New Republic.
Shawnkyr had surprised him by volunteering to accompany him back into New Republic space. Why she had, Jag didn't quite understand. But it had been comforting to see a friendly face, to have an officer he could rely on during stressful battle situations, in a strange and unfamiliar territory. If he had been by himself he would have stayed simply to see what happened next. Yet, he wasn't.
He exhaled slowly, unable to meet her curious, red eyes. "We…we can assemble a report and transmit it by holocomm. We can explain that more evaluation is needed... that we are doing our part to minimize the threat the Yuuzhan Vong pose to the Chiss Ascendancy."
Shawnkyr stiffened at first, but then inclined her head politely, a subtle sadness suffusing her expression. Out of all the reactions, sadness was not something he had expected. It was something that caught him off-guard and added to his confusion
"I will stay," Shawnkyr said, her voice subdued. "Until you see fit for the two of us to return."
Jag closed his eyes. "Thank you."
"Colonel." She waited until he met her gaze. "If I die here, I want you to promise to return. If I stay here, I am delaying the execution of my duty. If I die, you must carry out my duty and return to our people."
He nodded. It was only fair. She had followed him thus far without rejecting his change in agendas. It was only right that he should grant her this wish.
"I agree. And Shawnkyr."
"Yes?"
"Thank you for believing in me."
"Of course," Shawnkyr replied, a hint of wistfulness in her voice. "You are my commanding officer after all."
She then clicked her heels together, saluted, and left. This left Jag alone in the hangar, illuminated only by the hanging light fixtures above.
(0) *(0)*
Palanhi System
Ganner Rhysode figured he was doing well so far. He had found a hidden force of Yuuzhan Vong, managed to escape to Palanhi itself without being detected, and hadn't yet been shot at again. Pal'iva, his reporter contact with the Galactic Star, had apparently informed the president of his arrival, and the loyalist forces had let his X-wing pass without any challenge.

When he landed at the primary spaceport of Palanhi's capital city, Ganner was greeted by a militia that took him to the presidential palace. There he learned that the president had actually been gravely wounded by one of the assassination attempts, the vice-president had decided the cabal of generals had a better chance of survival and had jumped ship, and the cabinet had more or less disbanded itself in a panic.

The resistance was being held together by a single general who had stayed loyal to the president and the president's daughter.

"Thank you for coming, Jedi Rhysode," the president's daughter, a black-haired woman in her twenties, greeted Ganner in the presidential living quarters. "Your presence will be a great boost to our morale."

Ganner briefly noted the president in bed on life-support. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I understand that the Yuuzhan Vong are already in the system?"

"Unfortunately."

"Then there is very little you can do." She bowed her head. "I am well aware of what the Yuuzhan Vong have done to the planets they conquered. I am not under any delusion we can stop them or negotiate with them. Preparations were already being made for a full scale evacuation of Palanhi before you arrived. The most we can do now is to save as many people as possible."

"Have you tried to negotiate with the other generals?" Ganner asked. "If they know what the Yuuzhan Vong will do to the people of this planet, wouldn't they have second thoughts?"

"The Commander General of the Peace Brigaders is on the *Indigo*, General Drado's flag. The Peace Brigade has indicated that any negotiations must include our immediate surrender to the Yuuzhan Vong. If the military tries to settle peacefully, the Peace Brigade will consider it an act of aggression against them."

"General Drado would be the leader of the coup?"

"Yes. There is also one other thing. They are unaware of my father's declining health. General Stola, the general supporting our cause, has been using a holographic overlay whenever we contact Drado and the others. I fear that if they learn of my father's condition, they will launch their attack."

"Do you think Drado would reconsider his choices if I talked with them?"

"I don't think it would hurt. But what about Commander General Rinmek of the Peace Brigade?"

"I've actually had several conversations with him during my broadcast…" Ganner trailed off, a thought coming to him as he stared

at a satellite dish outside through one of the windows in the room. "If the Galactic Star can still broadcast, do you think we can set up a special program?"
"What do you suggest?"
"Well, I got the impression the generals were doing this to protect the people of Palanhi. The people of Palanhi believe that supporting the New Republic is better than living under the Vong. The Peace Brigaders think otherwise. What if," Ganner motioned to the Galactic Star's transmission tower on a nearby hill. "Instead of a few deciding the actions and lives of many, we let everyone decide for themselves?"
(0) *(0)*
Coruscant
Tahiri did her best to tune out the non-stop cycle of guilt and sorrow swirling about her mind. Regrets and despair enough to have driven a lesser person insane continued to eat away at her still aching heart. Lord Nyax's main mistake, however, was to use the pain of Anakin's death against her. The sorrow and despair she was drowning in was undercut by a current of seething rage.
How dare Lord Nyax use her feelings for Anakin against her? The rage kept her going, enabled her to endure as much emotional pain as Lord Nyax, even his new and improved self, could dish out. Nevertheless, tears continued to fall silently down her cheeks as she treaded through the miasma of dark side energy filling the street.
She couldn't deny that she missed Anakin. Missed the reassurance his Force presence had always provided. Her feelings for him, made raw by the wounds Lord Nyax was reopening, made her a blazing nova of anguish in the Force.
And Lord Nyax was eating it up.
Tahiri smiled a twisted smile and shouted to the shadows in Yuuzhan Vong. "[Go ahead! Feast! You may take pleasure in giving pain, but I take pleasure in pain itself. We are part Yuuzhan Vong, pain is nothing to us!]"
The pain of Anakin's death was amplified several fold, and Tahiri let out a deranged sound that was a mix between a laugh and a sob. "[Yes, those memories do hurt. Hurt more than anything. But they also make me stronger. We are the same in many ways, Lord Nyax. The main difference is that I can shatter you. You, however, can't break what's already broken.]"
Bone chilling laughter was released from the grieving teen as she stood in the middle of the empty street, her head rolled back towards the darkened sky, eyes closed. Rain began to fall, the droplets splashing off her face and her tunic. Her hands were held out, away

from her sides, as if welcoming the mind-shattering anguish that flooded and swirled all around her. Tahiri's tears and sweat mixed with the rain as the shower rapidly turned into a downpour, drenching Tahiri's body like the anguish that was flooding her soul.
Water pooled around her bare feet, the chilling rain causing strands hair to stick to her face.
She slowly opened her eyes. Her irises were a deep green, so dark they were nearly back. Eyes reddened both from her crying, but also from the feelings overwhelming her. She continued to laugh under Lord Nyax's bombardment, her veins, pale blue standing out against sickly white skin.
Force energy, dark and twisted, began pulsating out from her. Raindrops were banished with each pulse. A nearby speeder, long abandoned by its owner, was crushed as a wave of energy washed over it. Walls of the nearby buildings began to vibrate, loose pieces falling off with every shake. Windows shattered, metal compacted, the ground beneath Tahiri's feet vibrating violently.
Tahiri's eyes flashed with its red and black hues and she abruptly thrust one hand out through the rain. Her grief-maddened gaze swept the area with deliberate slowness and settled upon a gutted storefront. A single, misshapen figure lurked inside.
She snarled, her teeth bared in hatred as raindrops streamed down her face. "I found you!"
(0) Chapter End *(0)*
A\N: Hope you all enjoyed an early update (I had some spare time). Just continuing with the dark tone set by the previous chapter. Things do brighten up a little in the next chapter though. I left out Czulkang Lah's first attack and the infiltration's team trip to Coruscant in the Record Time, because I wanted to foucs more on character building. Ganner's adventure will take the place of the Han/Leia adventure in canon.
For those who wanted to see more of Tenel Ka, so far I have her in small roles, mostly J/T scenes, in both my version of Destiny's Way, and my book one of the Force Heretic trilogy. She won't appear for another five-ish chapters though.
Many of the lines between Jag and Shawnkyr, mainly Jag's reasons for staying, were borrowed from their scene in the book.
As always, please review if you so desire.

ADA 17

Seventeen

(0) *(0)*

Coruscant

Lord Nyax burst out of the shadows, his massive form barreling through the raindrops almost in slow motion as his full weight slammed into Tahiri's petite form with the speed of a freight train. The blond Jedi was thrown into the air like a rag-doll, collapsing as her body impacted loudly with an unforgiving wall.

The deranged dark Jedi sprinted the short distance to his prey, his feet splashing loudly on the rain-soaked ground, intent on finishing her off.

A flash of light, a superheated sniper bolt zipping through the air. Only Lord Nyax's faster than an average Jedi's reflexes had saved his head from being liquefied.

By the time he turned back to his prey, she was no longer on the ground. In fact, he couldn't see her anywhere. A faint disturbance of the air above him, and Lord Nyax's elbow blades activated to intercept Tahiri's downward attack. A vivid blue lightsaber crashed violently against Lord Nyax's crimson blades, before the lithe teen propelled herself backwards and sent a powerful Force Push towards the insane lab experiment.

Lord Nyax staggered backwards several steps, but was otherwise unaffected.

Tahiri used the time to launch another one of her attacks. She darted forward, and with pinpoint precision, sliced off Lord Nyax's left arm just above the elbow. The arm, plus the lightsaber that had been embedded in it, fell to the ground soundlessly.

Lord Nyax didn't appear to be at all fazed by the loss of his arm. Instead, he held out his other and lifted Tahiri into the air with the Force. With his fist, he began to make a crushing motion.

Tahiri let out a gargling gasp of pain, coughing up blood as her internal organs were constricted.

Then, Lord Nyax promptly lost his other arm.

The stunned dark Jedi glanced down at the severed limb in disbelief. The blade on his knee intercepted Mara's follow up strike, and the lab experiment hastily darted down the street to escape. He didn't get far. An explosion from an improvised mine promptly ripped apart Lord Nyax's legs.

He howled in anger. The thought of being defeated by his prey, by *Jeedai*, a humiliating one. Concentrating his hatred, his rage, the essence of who he was, a stream of pure dark-side Force energy flowed out of him, unseen by the others. It ghosted along the shadows of the building, searching for a compatible body. Someone who was

Force-sensitive, but also capable of maintaining his Vong-created personality.
Mara realized what was happening a split second before it occurred. "No!" Mara yelled, immediately pulling Tahiri's battered form to herself and surrounding the young girl in a protective shell of Force-energy. Both were knocked off their feet as the essence of Lord Nyax bombarded Tahiri's body with everything it had.
Tahiri convulsed. Visible black streams of energy coursing through and from her pores.
"No!" Mara hissed again, gripping Tahiri's head in both her hands and pressing her forehead to the girl's scars. Rainwater trickled off of her and onto Tahiri's pale, convulsing, soaked form. Kyle and Jaden stood by helplessly as Tahiri continued to spasm violently.
"What's Lord Nyax doing?" Jaden gaped.
"He's trying to take over Tahiri's body," Kyle replied tersely, reinforcing Mara's strength with his own. "Similar to what Emperor Palpatine did with his clone-self."
Tahiri, though she would have ordinarily been able to fight off Lord Nyax, was too hurt emotionally and physically for her to launch any sort of defense on her own. Even as Lord Nyax began to take over, Tahiri was already retreating. She didn't see any point in living any more. What was the future to her but something devoid of any joy or happiness? Through the Force, she could see herself, alone and bitter. Used by those around her for their own goals. Forgotten by everyone. The pitter-patter of rain splashing everywhere only seemed to add to the despair that had consumed her.
"Don't you dare, Tahiri," Mara said firmly, rain dripping off the copper lashes of her tightly closed eyes as she tried to fight off the animalistic spirit of Lord Nyax. The fact that Lord Nyax was doing this on a purely instinctive level, to preserve his own life, made it all the more dangerous for both him and Tahiri. Without proper training and knowledge, transferring souls could be damaging to all involved. "Don't you let that lab experiment win! Come on! What am I going to tell Jaina? Kam and Tionne? We're all grieving because we lost Anakin. Do you want to add to their sorrows too? Live, damn it!"
Tahiri could hear Mara's voice, but decided to block it out. She didn't want to be a Jedi any more. Didn't want to be Tahiri anymore. Being a Jedi hurt. Being Tahiri, hurt. Yuuzhan Vong were fine with pain, but her Tahiri self and Jedi self were not. Tahiri could feel herself split, her mind unraveling. The coldness of her rain-soaked clothing mirrored the coldness she felt within.

As she began to focus more on her Yuuzhan Vong self, on the memory of Riina, an electric current jolted her. A connection she thought she had lost for good had returned. But it wasn't possible, she told herself. He was dead. She had felt him die. The thoughts caused her to retreat to Riina once more. Again, the electric jolt, a completed circuit. Frantic, Tahiri dove even deeper into her Vong personality; or the detached fragments that used to be Riina, jarred free by Lord Nyax's attack. She needed Riina's senses, needed to see the universe through the eyes of a Yuuzhan Vong.

The circuit became stronger. Now Tahiri was certain that it was him. She didn't know how or where he was, but she could feel him. Her desire to continue to feel that spark of life that was *his,* causing her to instinctively call on her own version of Vongsense.

Hope was reborn and Tahiri's mind snapped back together in solid form. Cursing mentally in both Yuuzhan Vong and Basic, Tahiri focused on repelling the invader in her body. She had already had one alter ego, she didn't need to develop a second one. There was only room for one personality in her body after all.

To those watching Tahiri, it was as if something had kick-started the girl's defenses and sent it into overdrive. But it was more than that. None of them could detect the Force emanating from the unconscious teen, which worried them considerably. When Tahiri's green eyes snapped up and the girl began swearing in Yuuzhan Vong, Kyle moved to pull Mara away.

However, Mara snarled at Kyle like a mother nexu protecting her cubs, and pulled Tahiri even closer to her. Tahiri continued to project no tangible Force presence, but it was obvious that whatever she was doing was affecting Lord Nyax's essence. The dark streams of energy were now leaving the teen's body faster than they was entering it, before his progress was stopped altogether.

All the while, Mara continued to hold onto Tahiri, using their master-apprentice Force bond in an attempt to see into the girl's head.

Tahiri's presence in the Force suddenly made an explosive return. The rain was momentarily blasted away from her, and Lord Nyax's soul was sent hurtling away from her body, disappearing back into the darkness of the undercity from which it had come. The others remained focused on her, in complete disbelief.

Tahiri's Force presence had returned, but there was another's presence intertwined with it. The second presence faded away within a heartbeat, but there was no mistaking it.

Mara looked wide-eyed down at the girl in her arms, unable to voice the question that was stuck in her throat.

Tahiri, for her part, couldn't have looked more content as she grinned back up at her master, tears in her eyes mingling with the rain. Though in good need of a bacta tank, none of her injuries appeared to be bothering her at all, making her tears ones of happiness instead of pain.
Tahiri's joy was all Mara needed as her confirmation, and as gently as she could, wrapped the small teen up in a motherly hug.
Sniffling, Tahiri rested her head on Mara's shoulder. "He's alive!"
(0) *(0)*
Borleias
The spike in Anakin's Force presence had bewildered, stunned, shocked, heartened, and otherwise electrified every single Force user on the planet. But just as sharply as they all felt it, the presence was gone. Once more leaving an aching absence, a void. The elation turned to confusion, then to despair once more as the Jedi tried to come to grips with what had just occurred.
Everyone, save for one person, began to dismiss Anakin's brief appearance in the Force as an anomaly or some prophetic warning. Jacen, however, had immediately dropped into a Force trance, turning himself as 'small' as he could. Over the past few days, with constant experimentation under Vergere's guidance, he had become quite adept at turning himself small. Hiding in the Force. He had even snuck up on Luke once, surprising the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order.
After ending up in the med-bay the first time around, Jacen had learned to give the other Force-users an advanced warning before dropping into such a deep, Vongsense-enhanced trance. This time, however, he hadn't had the opportunity. When he wasn't helping to train the remaining Freed Ones, he had spent most of his free time searching for his younger brother. Knowing that Vongsense was a different spectrum of the Force, and thus unlikely to have been served by conventional means, Jacen would always switch over to Vongsense once he had turned himself 'small'.
The second Jacen felt his brother through the Force, and then had the connection severed in an instant, Jacen knew his suspicions had been confirmed. The severance was much sharper than before and still left an emptiness. But it was an emptiness he was familiar with. It was something he had just begun to understand during his torment in the Embrace of Pain.
Jacen inhaled deeply as the agony from the Yuuzhan Vong torture device returned with a vengeance. During that brief period on Coruscant, he had felt nothing but pain. Even when the pain was over, he was left empty, alone in the chair. Cut off from the Force. Every

time the chair activated, it was though another piece of him had died. Through it all, Vergere would watch or offer words of wisdom and comfort. They were the only thing that had kept him going. The only thing that hadn't hurt.

Now that he was once again feeling that same emptiness within himself, a feeling worse than death, Jacen knew on some level what was happening to Anakin. It wasn't his own emptiness he was feeling this time, but Anakin's; which was amplified somehow by his sudden disconnect from the Force. It was the repeating echoes of Anakin's last emotions, a trauma played back over and over again like a holovid. Anakin was hiding in the pain, masking his presence in plain sight. Most people were adverse to pain, more so if the pain was Force related. No one who cared for Anakin would willingly explore the void his death had left within themselves. Coupled with Anakin's knack for using Vongsense, Jacen had no doubt that Anakin was more than capable of hiding himself. But why? Why did he not want anyone to find him?

Jacen needed to empathize with Anakin, accept both the pain of his time on Coruscant, and the alien nature of the slaveseed within himself to have any hope of locating his young brother.

Closing his eyes and concentrating hard, Jacen sought the initial direction of Anakin's tangible Force presence. The trail was fading fast, like vapor trail through the sky on a windy day. Before he lost his brother's trail completely, Jacen delved deeper into the Force, then switched over to Vongsense, tapping into the seed embedded in him and forcing it to aid him in his search.

His search took him through several systems, the shadowy presence of various Yuuzhan Vong ships rushing by like smoke. He continued through the stars, stretching his mind out, drawing on his own Force reserves. His gaze was so focused, he was so 'small,' that it was like threading his powerful aura through a hole the size of a pinhead.

He was now so far out from Borleias that he could no longer distinguish between individual Vong ships and fleets of them, their presence all the same pinpricks of wrongness. Jacen drew his focus back slowly, his mind cataloguing the abscesses representing all the Yuuzhan Vong he was sensing. He was tiring quickly and knew he could only keep up this intense search for just a little longer.

It was then that he found something out of place. Two extremely faint dots of nothingness floating at the edge of several much larger shadowy pockets.

These dots were extremely small and dim, and he had completely missed them in his initial scan. It was as if they were Yuuzhan Vong, but severely muted within the realm of his Vongsense.
"Anakin?" Jacen mumbled, trying to focus on the two faint dots. Try as he might, however, something else was keeping him from 'zooming in'. A different tactic was needed. Jacen switched out of Vongsense, breathing heavily as the pain of his brother's 'death' made itself known again. If he couldn't touch his brother through Vongsense or through the Force externally, then maybe it was time to use their sibling bond as a back door. It wasn't the most pleasant of solutions. If he wanted to force open their sibling bond, Jacen needed to delve through not only the pain he had felt on Coruscant, but the echoes of the pain Anakin had left behind to hide himself. Definitely not pleasant or easy. But then again, Jacen mused, this was his brother. When had anything been pleasant or easy between them recently. Yet, Jacen would much rather have things be unpleasant and difficult than not have his younger brother at all.
Sweat pouring down his face, his hands gripped tightly into fists, Jacen tried to delve into the void within himself, the void that contained his little brother's presence.
He was small, wading through a whole lot of nothingness, of emptiness. Echoes of pain. Of longing. Of fear and distress.
Memories of being bound in the Embrace of Pain returned with full force, and Jacen let out an audible gasp of pain. Vergere's voice droning even as liquid fire coursed through is every nerve. Alone and abandoned. Being stripped of everything he was. Then, just when he was on the verge of being broken completely: relief.
Anakin's arrival.
A rescue.
They might not have always agreed on everything, but they were still brothers.
Jacen focused on that final thought, enduring his own pain for the sake of finding his lost brother. In the process, he felt the presence of his twin, Jaina, piggy-backing onto his quest. Jacen gave her the Force equivalent of a 'hang on, you're in for a wild ride' type warning, and then instead of wading around in the darkness, dove in full force. He followed the link of pain, the only link he had left to his brother's continued existence. No sane person would have even thought to use pain as a Force connection.
Jacen felt a powerful, overwhelming surge of emotion, like a roaring ocean in his ears, and then, just as it reached a crescendo, silence.

Cautiously, Jacen opened his eyes. He was no longer in his quarters on Borleias. Well, he was no longer in his body, but he was less concerned about that at the moment.
In front of him was Anakin. But not the seventeen-going-on-eighteen year old young man that Jacen remembered. Instead, Anakin looked to be eight, nine years old. He was curled up in a fetal position on the ground, eyes squeezed shut.
"*Anakin!"* Jacen heard his twin cry out, her voice sounding muted to his ears, as if they were underwater. He looked to his side and saw a hazy, glowing form in the shape of his sister. She was reaching out to Anakin, but appeared unable to get any closer.
Jacen glanced down at his own form. He was in a similarly hazy form, like a Force ghost but less concentrated. Experimentally, he took a step closer to Anakin. Or tried to. Once again, an invisible force kicked in, keeping both he and Jaina away.
"*Jaina,"* Jacen motioned to get his twin's attention. She turned a tearful and almost panicked gaze to him.
"*Why can't we get to him?"*
"*Something's blocking us. Getting in the way of our sibling-bond."*
"*I know that!"* Jaina snapped back, casting an anxious glance back towards their brother. Her voice softened. *"That doesn't help any in how we can get to him."*
"*I have an 'Anakin-like' idea."*
"*That's the second time this week someone had that kind of idea,"* Jaina remarked faintly.
"*I'm going to try and switch to Vongsense to find out what's happening. Completely switch to Vongsense."*
Jaina was silent for a moment. *"You think it's Anakin whose keeping us away?"*
"*If you or I were in danger, would you want the others to get close? There has to be a reason why he looks eight and not seventeen."*
"Okay, then do it."
"There might be a tiny problem if I do." Jacen likewise glanced back towards his brother. *"Since the both of us are tied this deep in the Force, I don't think it'll affect you. But if I switch completely over to Vongsense, without leaving a piece of myself anchored in the regular Force, I might…disappear from the Force just like Anakin."*
Jaina took a breath, then nodded. *"If I keep myself calm, it should prevent everyone else from panicking. Do it."*
Jacen offered his sister a faint smile. *"Here I go then."*
The slaveseed had been meant to subjugate him. Now it was at his command. Concentrating, he merged with its life-force, timing his

every breath, his every heartbeat and thought. He completely left his own galaxy, his own way of life; combining with this alien life form to once again become one with it.
The world he was viewing changed before his eyes. Both Anakin and his sister disappeared from his senses. Instead, an opaque bubble was floating where his little brother had once been. Jacen reached out and placed a hand on the bubble.
It was pulsating in time with Anakin's heart.
Jacen frowned. He had seen many different types of wildlife and recognized what the bubble was. That concerned him greatly. It was a cocoon. He tried to press his way into the bubble, but it resisted him.
"*Anakin?"* Jacen said hesitantly. *"Can you hear me?"*
Silence. Then, *"Go away."*
Now Jacen was more than a bit worried. That voice had been Anakin's, but a lot younger, full of fear and pain. *"Anakin, it's me. Jacen. Can I come in?"*
"You're just going to yell at me some more. Go away."
"I won't yell at you, I promise."
Silence once more.
"Anakin, have I ever broken a promise to you?"
Jacen felt his hand sink into the bubble-like cocoon.
"Can Jaina join us too?"
"Jaya's mad at me."
Not knowing why Anakin was saying these things, Jacen tried playing along. *"She isn't anymore. Remember the time you replaced the oil in her oilcan with fast-oxidizing, rust-colored paint? She was mad then too, but she got over it. She just wants her little brother back. <u>We</u> just want our little brother back."*
"Promise?"
"I promise."
"Okay…"
Jacen exhaled and emerged back into the regular realm of the Force. Jaina was still there, staring at Anakin with unshed tears in her eyes. Jacen looked back in Anakin's direction. His brother was sitting up, but now hugging his knees. Fearful blue eyes were watching the both of them.
"He said it was okay, Jaya," Jacen said softly.
Jaina needed no further encouragement as she rushed to Anakin and enfolded him in a crushing hug. She continued to whisper Anakin's name over and over again, while promising to do better to protect him, to not let anyone hurt him.

Jacen, his own eyes suspiciously wet, waited until Jaina had moved to Anakin's side. He crouched down in front of the eight-year old form of his brother. *"Hey, Anakin. You okay?"*
"You're not disappointed in me?"
The mix of heartbreak and hopefulness coming from the child-form of Anakin tugged at Jacen's chest. Fighting back the urge to rub at his eyes, he shook his head. *"How could I ever be, you're my little brother? We may have our fights and disagreements from time to time, but I'll always be proud to call you my brother."*
"Really?" Anakin looked up at Jacen, eyes shining.
"Really, really," Jacen smiled, the feelings Jaina was emitting enhancing his own relief and happiness at finding their brother once more.
"Where are you now, Anakin?"
Anakin seemed to withdraw into himself slightly. Jaina, sensing Anakin's fading presence, promptly tightened the arm she had draped around his shoulders. *"It's okay, little brother. We won't be angry. We're just glad to know that you're alive."*
Anakin studied his sister's face. *"I'm training to become better."*
"Better?"
"So Jacen and you won't be mean to me anymore. So no one else will die. I don't like it when people die and it's my fault."
"What about Tahiri?" Jaina said softly. *"Aren't you worried about what she feels? She thought that you died too."*
Anakin bowed his head and shook it. *"She didn't want to be my friend any more. She told me she hated me."*
"What? When?" Jaina looked to her twin worriedly. Jacen's lips thinned and he waited for Anakin to respond.
"When you two were angry and tried to hurt me. She was with you," Anakin replied mulishly, as if unable to believe that they had forgotten such a thing.
"Anakin," Jacen said. *"Neither Jaina nor I would ever do anything to hurt you. Ever."*
"And neither would Tahiri," Jaina added. *"Whatever you saw or heard, it had to be a trick."*
Anakin shook his head, eyes flashing heatedly. *"The three of you were there. I felt you in the Force. You yelled at me for abandoning everyone on Borleias. Jacen said I was too arrogant and would get everyone killed. You were there!"*
"Finish your training as soon as you can," Jacen said quickly, an understanding dawning on him. *"We all miss you and want you back. Even Tahiri."*

Jaina seemed to sense the tone in his voice, because her eyes darted sharply to him before she unwrapped her arm from around Anakin and stood. *"Jace is right. Once you're done, you can go help us kick Vong butt. Just like before. So come back soon, okay, little brother?"*
Anakin nodded and faded away.
Jacen immediately pulled both himself and his sister back to their bodies on Borleias. He felt an extreme amount of anger at his realization, and ignored the surprised group of people around him as he promptly stood and shoved his way out into the hallway.
"Jacen!" He heard his uncle call out, but he ignored him.
He continued to storm through the base, furiously cursing his own blindness. Why else had Vergere been coaching him on 'becoming small'? How else could she have known that the technique would work.
Entering the holding-cell area of the biotics facility, he used a brief Force suggestion to get the guards to leave. He then stopped in front of Vergere's cell, livid.
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"I have not told you many things. To what do you refer to this time, young Solo?" An un-fazed Vergere replied.
"Someone who knows of your training techniques, who uses pain and the severing of the Force to teach, has my brother. You know who it is."
"Do I?"
"Vergere," Jacen growled, unable to rein in his anger. "I recognized what was happening to him from what he told me. You used the very same techniques on me on Coruscant. But where Anakin found me before I broke, whoever has him has already broken him. It's no coincidence that both he and I were put through the same torment."
"Tell me, young Solo," there was a bit of an edge to Vergere's voice. "Was the suffering you endured not worth the knowledge you gained from it? Have I not opened your eyes up to the Force, helped you be more than you were? Would you have been able to reach out to your brother, across the stars and through the veil of death itself, if you had not died on Coruscant as well?"
Jacen narrowed his eyes. "You didn't answer my question."
"I will answer your question," Vergere said serenely. "Only if you answer my own first."
"It is true…"Jacen admitted reluctantly, his anger fading. "That you have helped me improve both my understanding of the Force and my capacity to wield it. It is also true that if you had not stripped away the training that had been ingrained in me, it would have hindered my ability to learn the Force a different way."

Vergere inclined her head and responded to Jacen's question. "It is true, I know who trains your brother. Her location, I do not know. I did not tell you because it is necessary for your brother's destiny to learn just as you have, that there is more than one way to view the Force. He will return to you in time. Or are you so vain as to deny him the same learning opportunity that was available to you?"
Jacen swallowed, then shook his head once.
"Then a final question before you leave, Jacen Solo. Are you so certain that your brother found you before you broke on Coruscant? Or are you so broken you can't even recognize if you are whole or not?"
Jacen's hand moved to the scar on his chest as Vergere smiled, then closed her eyes to resume her meditation. There was a movement outside the door, and Jacen saw his sister and the others running down the hallway to catch up with him.
"Jacen, what's wrong?" Jaina asked, giving Vergere a dirty look.
Jacen forced himself to smile disarmingly and shook his head.
"Nothing, Jaina. Just a misunderstanding. That's all. A misunderstanding."
(0) *(0)*
Palanhi, Palanhi System
"We welcome all of you throughout the galaxy for our special broadcast. As many of you all know, I'm Pal'iva Konat of the Galactic Star. Now I know many of you are confused by our unique broadcast time, but fear not, the latest holodrama episode of *Will Ewok or Will He Run,* and the next episode of the latest documentary about deep-space solar miners, *Dancing with the Stars,* will be on right after this. Right now, in our very studio, we have several faces that will be familiar to our returning viewers. Here today for what will surely be a lively debate is Jedi Ganner Rhysode, representing the New Republic. Commander General Jartre Rinmek, representing the Peace Brigade and their Yuuzhan Vong allies. New to our show is daughter of the president of Palanhi, Doria Anshal. And in keeping with our tradition of unbiased reporting, we also have the Palanhi opposition leader, General Tindor Drado.
At stake on this very special episode is the fate of the planet of Palanhi. There will be two non-binding votes at the end of this debate. The first will represent what the rest of the galaxy thinks. Will the Palanhi system be better off in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong and Peace Brigaders, or will their interests be better served by staying with the New Republic? The second vote will be for the Palanhi system only, where the people on all occupied moons, planets, and space-stations will have their say in their own fate. Though non-binding, it is the hope

of the Galactic Star that this conflict can be solved without any further loss of life or unnecessary violence.
So, to begin this debate, Commander General Rinmek, General Drado, a question from our audience asks: Why do you think Palanhi will be better off under Yuuzhan Vong rule when the Yuuzhan Vong are known to enslave the populations of the planets they conquer?"
General Rinmek, a portly man with aristocratic features, moved to his microphone to answer first. "I'm sorry, Ms. Konat. I would first like to make a small differentiation for those watching. The Yuuzhan Vong *only* enslave the populations of the planets they *conquer*. Should the people of Palanhi choose to side with the Yuuzhan Vong, then they would be considered valued allies in this war. Much like the planets with large Peace Brigade presences have been allowed to prosper, so too would those in the Palanhi System. General Drado was wise enough to recognize this."
"Indeed," General Drado was a much older gentleman, who in his youth, saw fighting on the front lines of the Clone War. "It is the reason why both Commander General Rinmek and I have agreed to attend this live debate. This war has already taken so many lives. We need not add any Palanhi blood to the conflict. Should we choose to fight, our sons, daughters, wives and husbands will die needlessly. The New Republic is not in any position to support us despite the resources we have sent them. The Peace Brigade and the Yuuzhan Vong allies, however, are in a position to provide military support and security. When faced with the choice to support an ailing government or to throw our lot in with a new one, I choose the option that will save the most lives."
The orange skinned Twi'lek broadcaster and mediator inclined her head politely. "I am sure the both of you are doing what you think is best. Now, our next question is to Jedi Rhysode and Ms. Anshal. Both of the other members of the debate have touched on it, so here is a compound question from the former vice-president of Palanhi: How will the loss of Palanhian lives be worth the struggle if Palanhi has a chance to prosper anyways under Yuuzhan Vong rule? The New Republic is retreating on all fronts from the Yuuzhan Vong, so why should the people of Palanhi throw their lives away for them?"
Ganner did his best to keep from rolling his eyes on live, galactic holofeed, and politely motioned for the president's daughter to go first.
"Thank you, Jedi Rhysode. People of Palanhi, you have all supported my father's decisions for over twenty years, and you have all prospered from it. He would not have thrown in his lot with the New Republic if he did not think it would benefit us all. As General Drado

should recall, even in the Clone Wars we did not shy away from war. There were those who wanted to side with the Separatist because they were a new power who promised to free us from the stagnation of the Republic. There were also those who sided with the Republic, believing that our way of life was best served through its continuation. Those who wanted a new way of life prevailed, but look at what happened afterward. Many died fighting the change, and when change finally occurred, we became a garrison planet for the Empire. Our way of life was replaced by the cold, unfeeling logic of a powerful police state. We have prospered under the New Republic. They have been one of our strongest allies and supporters. Should we truly abandon them when they are weak just for the promise of a life that *might* be better? We have only just begun to grow into our identity. Do we want that identity cut short by an equally militaristic Yuuzhan Vong lifestyle? Lives will be lost. But they will be lives that will be remembered, when in a decade or two from now, we look back and see that this was the moment we stood up for our beliefs, our way of living. We can only do this if *all* of Palanhi stands united. Not as supporters of the New Republic or Yuuzhan Vong, but as Palanhians who want to have a say in how their own lives are run."

Ganner blinked at his co-debator in complete shock. Then, realizing the cameras had turned to him, offered a faint smile. "How do you expect me to follow a speech like that? I think she said it all. Ultimately, it's not the New Republic or Peace Brigade who gets to decide your fate, but you alone. If you truly think it's better to side with the Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong, go ahead. As a Jedi, it isn't my job to tell you how to think or act. It's just my job to get you to consider all the possibilities before you make your decision. Will people die if you decide to fight? Yes. But then again, it's a war that has spread throughout the galaxy. Many other planets have faced the same choice you have. So it is up to you. Stand up for what you believe in, possibly dying in the process, or live your life safely under the rule of someone else."

Pal'iva Konat smiled faintly at Ganner, before returning to the teleprompter. "There you have it, the first arguments from both sides. We'll ask another three questions, before we leave the fate of Palanhi up to you all."

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Ganner paced nervously in the lobby of the Galactic Star's headquarters. The results of the vote were still pouring in from all over. The Peace Brigade commander had already returned to his ship, but

General Drado had opted to remain at the broadcast station's headquarters.
After meeting General Drado in person, Ganner realized that the man wasn't the Jedi-hating Peace Brigader type that he had assumed he was. The general was just an old veteran who had seen too much of death and war and didn't want his planet to suffer again. The general had lost his entire family during the Clone War and did not anyone else to go through what he had.
Ganner envied the man's calm. General Drado simply had his eyes closed and looked to be enjoying a nice nap. With the fate of the system on the line, you would think he would show at least some hint of emotion.
"Even in the old days, before the Empire, the Jedi stood for one thing, but always did another." General Drado's soft-spoken voice caught Ganner off-guard. Drado's eyes were still closed, his old, wrinkled hands gripping a polished, wooden walking stick. "You stand for peace, the protection of lives. Yet, wherever you go, people die. Wherever you are, the violence comes to you. I was trying to spare my people another era of fighting, of death. I will not bother asking if you have fought in a war before. In this day and age, it does not seem like one generation can grow up without being caught up in a war. But I could try, couldn't I? To at least have one generation on Palanhi be free from bloodshed?"
"Then what of the generation after?" Ganner asked gently, taking a seat next to the old general.
"Wishful naïve thinking would have me hope that a single generation could break the cycle of violence that continues to consume this galaxy." Drado said with a dry laugh. "Can you think about it, Jedi Rhysode? If an entire generation in this galaxy takes a break from war, for once, then maybe a cycle of peace can be started."
"That would be nice," Ganner smiled sadly.
Drado took a deep breath after several long moments. "No matter what the results of the vote, I intend to side with the people of Palanhi. Lady Anshal and yourself have reminded me that I cannot protect my people from death and violence if they do not wish me to protect them. If they wish to fight and die, then it is my duty as a general of Palanhi to see to it that they take down as many of the enemy as they can."
Ganner looked up in surprise. "You have already sent the orders?"
Drado bowed his head once. "After I informed Commander General Rinmek of my decision, yes. I hope your Force is with you, Jedi, because this is a fight I do not think we can win."
"I've some experience in those types of fights," Ganner said roguishly.

Drado opened one eye and matched Ganner's smile. "As do I."
(0) *(0)*
Coruscant
"I'll never get Jedi," Kell Tainer mock-whispered. The rain around them had slowed to a light drizzle as the Yuuzhan Vong appeared to get a handle on the planet's atmospheric control systems. "One moment Aunt Tahiri is all cold and mean, and the next she's practically skipping down the streets of Coruscant."
"So why are you telling me?" Face said. "If you can't understand Jedi and you're married to one, what hope do I have?"
Kell looked thoughtful. "Maybe I should go over to that Ors person, she hangs out with them."
"You do that."
Doing as told, Kell dropped to the back of the group where Jan, Kyle, and Jaden were. "I'm starting a support group for those who have to deal with Jedi on a daily basis. Interested in joining?"
Jan raised an eyebrow. "Please tell me that wasn't a very bad pick-up line."
"Forget it, Tainer. Jan's immune to stupidity." Jaden sighed.
Kell cocked his head, an action that looked ridiculous because of his Yuuzhan Vong mask. "Vaccinated or immunity through prolonged exposure?"
"Prolonged exposure, definitely," Jan said, lightly slugging Jaden in his arm. "Did you want something?"
"Just trying to understand the sudden personality change in a teenage, Jedi, girl." Kell said. "Those three words are things I have no experience with or knowledge of at all."
"The 'teenage, Jedi, girl' part?" Kyle smiled, shaking his head in amusement.
Kell began to count on his fingers. "I have a son for starters. He's fifteen-ish, but I barely see him, so I have no idea what the mind of a teenager is like. Thank the flying monkeys for that. And I'm not a Jedi so I don't have any clue about your mystical 'Force'."
"'Flying monkeys'?" Jan said archly.
"How can I thank the Force if I don't have a single clue about how it works?" Kell said with a mock frown. "Flying monkeys, now they're easier to understand."
"Loran," Jan called out to the front. "You know that missing son you mentioned earlier? I found him."
"You weren't supposed to," Face replied dryly. "Leave him where you found him and pretend he doesn't exist."

The group shook their heads in amusement at the antics. It was hard not to feel lighthearted with the happiness emanating from the young teen at the center of their formation.
"Seriously though," Kell motioned to Tahiri while looking back at Jaden and Kyle. "What happened back there and why did her eyes go all red-black like that?"
At that question, both Kyle and Jaden sobered. Even Jan appeared subdued, as her countless experiences with dark-side Jedi enabled her to understand the basic reasons for Tahiri's change.
"In a nutshell, Tahiri had a very close brush with the dark side of the Force," Kyle responded, watching the young blond teen talk almost non-stop, albeit in a hushed voice, with Mara. "Lord Nyax was the embodiment of evil. Losing Anakin left Tahiri vulnerable to the feelings that often bring Jedi to the dark side. It was made worse when Lord Nyax's soul tried to take over her body. Something happened, though, and Tahiri suddenly rejected everything Lord Nyax stood for."
"Something?"
"For a brief second, Mara, Kyle, and I felt the presence of a Jedi we thought was dead," Jaden said when Kyle seemed reluctant to continue. "It was, or at least, they think it was, Anakin."
"So a dead Jedi comes back to life to help Tahiri kick the dark-side habit, then what? He goes back to being dead?"
"We don't know," Kyle admitted with a shrug. "But, at least to Tahiri, it looks like she still believes he's alive. Mara too. Since they're closer to him than Jaden or I are, they must still feel something of Anakin to believe as they do."
Face suddenly let out a whistle, and the group fell silent. Since the encounter with Lord Nyax, the group had been searching the lower levels of Coruscant for any sign of the other 'Vong-Jedi' mentioned by Tarc.
Their search, mainly guided by the Force, had continued to lead them lower and lower, towards the very depths of the planet. There they had discovered the remains of a shaping facility, hidden deep in the bowels of Coruscant. The fact that it was so hidden away suggested that the shaping occurring at this facility wasn't exactly of the 'normal' variety. The shapers there, however, were in no condition to answer questions. They had all been slain, and recently. The smell of decomposition hadn't yet set in and the bodies were still warm.
Within the one-chambered shaping lab was a large table that took up most of the room. Broken restraints suggested that some giant-bodied figure had torn free and slain his tormentors. Given that the shapers had all been killed with injuries that strongly resembled lightsaber

strikes, Tahiri had posited that Lord Nyax had found a new Force-sensitive, Vong-compatable host, something created by the now-dead shapers. It definitely wasn't the Vong-Jedi Tarc had mentioned. According to Tarc, the Vong-Jedi was supposed to be a small woman. In any case, the others definitely did not look forward to meeting whatever had broken loose. Nor did they want to meet Tarc's Vong-Jedi, whose reputation grew as they met small pockets of Coruscanti survivors.

From what they had learned, this Vong-Jedi had crushed entire groups of people with just a hand gesture. Had massacred other cells of survivors in seconds, often in a single draw of her glowing sword. She had brought down an entire building by holding out her hands. She spared no one. Smiled as she killed. Was a demon incarnate. And the horror stories only went on.

The group had yet to see a single sign of either target, and that did not bode well for them. There was no telling what would happen when either of the 'Vong-Jedi' decided to show themselves.

But, as Face's whistle echoed hauntingly through the ruins of the empty city around them, it seemed that they were about to find out. What had caught Face's attention was evident to all of them. A single figure was staring down at them from a large landing-pad several stories above them. Glimmering eyes watching them intently. Questioningly. Studying their every movement. The rest of the face was hidden in the shadows of an organic cowl, the body wrapped in a simple, living robe.

The members of Wraith Squadron, plus Jan, cautiously adjusted their grips on their blasters, while the Jedi stared back at their observer.

"That's her," Tarc whispered fearfully. "The 'Vong-Jedi'. You never see her coming. By the time you see her face, you're already dead."

As if summoned by Tarc's words, the figure watching them walked to the very edge of the landing platform, and then dropped straight down. It was at least a good dozen meter drop, but the figure landed silently, effortlessly, and more importantly, unharmed. Slowly straightening, the hooded figure stared silently at the group. A bony army covered in greyish-blue skin extended outwards, but the figure made no further movement.

"Danni, Tahiri, ideas?" Face said with false cheer.

Danni inclined her head to Tahiri, who swallowed and moved to the front of the group. She removed her Yuuzhan Vong mask and tossed it to her side. Her faux-crab armor developed by the Wraiths was also discarded.

Intelligent eyes spotted the three scars on Tahiri's forehead. The outstretched hand withdrew back into the thin robes worn by the figure.
Sibilantly, a Yuuzhan Vong voice, feminine and soft, echoed through the heads of the New Republic task group as the figure spoke aloud. Though the words were alien, Tahiri understood them. *"[The One-Who-Was-Shaped.]"*
"[I am she. What is your name?]"
"[I was never given a name. I am the Nameless One. If you wish a title, my beloved Onimi refers to me as 'Erella'.]"
"[Eh-ree-ya?]" Tahiri felt something click in her mind, like a long lost memory, as she mimicked the Yuuzhan Vong's pronunciation. "[Erella. It is a very old word. The shapers no longer use it. But if he calls you Erella, then you are Onimi's 'disciple'?]"
"[Onimi is generous]," The figure shook her head. "*[Compared to the knowledge and powers he wields, I am but a child. His vong'erella. It will still be many years until I am worthy of being his full disciple. But Onimi is great, he has risen me before the gods and sings my praises. He has turned the curse I was born with, a curse that caused my parents to abandon me for death, into a gift. Now I serve him and the gods, a loyal follower of the True Way.]"*
Tahiri felt a shiver run down her spine. There was nothing but fanatic loyalty engrained in every word being spoken. Taking a hesitant step forward, Tahiri tried to find out more about this 'Vong-Jedi' before her.
"[Why do you attack the non-Yuuzhan Vong of Yuuzhan'tar?]"
"[Why does an amphistaff impale its victims or the coufee cut deep? Just as you are, One-Who-Was-Shaped, I too am a weapon. Onimi tells me to cut, so I cut. He desires that I learn more about life and death, so I learn. Just as your master commands you, so does he.]"
"[You say Onimi is your master. What of the Supreme Overlord?]"
An audible hiss of distain was followed by the Nameless One's mocking reply. *"[The Overlord is but another instrument, proof of my master's greatness.]"*
Tahiri was growing increasingly wary of the other, slowly raising her yet-to-be activated lightsaber.
"[Do not fear me. We need not fight.]"
"[You need not serve Onimi]," Tahiri countered.
The Nameless One shifted. *"[And you need not serve the Jeedai.]"*
"[But neither of us can abandon the lives we know to help bring death to our own people.]" Tahiri activated her lightsaber.
"[Yet both of our lives are intertwined. Though we are of different parentage, we are sisters.]" The Nameless One pulled back her cowl to

reveal a face nearly as young as Tahiri's. Three vertical scars marked the Yuuzhan Vong's forehead. Those were the only scars on her otherwise unblemished, youthful face. *"[The gods have marked me as they have you. You have embraced your Jeedai ways. I have followed the True Way. We are of Yun-Ne'Shel's making, keeping our worlds balanced.]"*
"But we cannot be allies," Tahiri said hoarsely in Basic. The shock of seeing the three scars unnerving her. It was almost like looking into a twisted mirror image of herself. Of what she could have been.
A sad expression flickered across the Nameless One's face as she too inclined her head in understanding. *"[No, we cannot. But it does not mean we must fight.]*
A single tear escaping her eyes, Tahiri activated her lightsaber and shook her head once. "[Yes, it does.]"
"[To see the world in absolutes; I never thought that aspects of the True Way could be seen by another.]"
"[It is not an absolute,]" Tahiri replied, green eyes locking onto golden yellow. "[But I cannot allow you, as a weapon, to hurt anyone else. It is the way of the Jedi to protect those who cannot protect themselves.]"
"*[If the weapon cannot be wielded, it must be broken least it draw your blood? That is also a verse from the True Way. So strange that the way of the Jeedai and the True Way are similar in thought but different in expression. I have always found the more important verses to be the ones that follow. 'If your heart blood is drawn, then ensure that it is drawn in the name of our gods. Then wield the weapon, broken or not, and die with the names of the gods on your lips, for they will uplift you as you breathe your last.']"*
"[There is no death, there is the Force]," Tahiri whispered.
"[I know not of this 'Force', only this curse given to me by the gods,]"
The Nameless One held out her hand again, and a single lightsaber flew from her robes and into it. *"[If it is the will of the gods that only one of us can live. Then so be it. But I take no pleasure in fighting one who could be my sister. We are both Yuuzhan Vong and Jeedai. It seems cruel that the gods would pit us against one and other.]"*
Tahiri clenched her jaw, her face illuminated by her own blue blade. The Nameless One had yet to activate her own blade. "[Will you not fight?]"
"[I will because the gods bade me.]" The Nameless One replied. She held up her other hand, and the large landing pad she had descended from began to shake. Cracks appeared in the duracrete, before the entire platform gave way. Amazingly enough, the Nameless One stabilized the detached platform and began to lower it. As it grew

closer, Tahiri could see nearly a hundred Yuuzhan Vong warriors standing at the ready. *"[But I will command others to fight those behind you because it is Onimi's will.]"*
The landing platform touched down, and a stunned silence filled the air.
"[Die well, One-Who-Was-Shaped.]" The Nameless One said softly.
"[It's Tahiri, Tahiri Kwaad. And I have no intention of dying today.]"
"*[Nor do I.]"*
The Nameless One darted forward, a golden-bronze blade hissing to life.
Tahiri charged in turn, yelling a Yuuzhan Vong battle cry in defiance.
The warriors bellowed and launched a thundering onslaught.
Blasters whined as Wraith Squadron took cover.
Lightsabers hummed and flashed.
All hell broke loose.
(0) *(0)*
Palanhi, Palanhi System
The skies of Palanhi were full of people fleeing the coming battle. Though the rest of the galaxy had still been divided when it came to siding with the Yuuzhan Vong or New Republic, the results of the non-binding, Palanhi-only poll, had been largely one sided, in favor of the New Republic. It was enough to convince the few holdouts in the military to aid in Palanhi's defense.
Even then, they all knew that while they might be able to hold off the Yuuzhan Vong, they could not last indefinitely.
As it was, the small invasion force Ganner had seen hiding out on one of the gas giants was already streaming towards the planet. Assisting the Vong force were about a dozen Peace Brigade vessels and several other mercenary ships. The Palanhian Home Fleet was standing by, having abandoned the outer planets in favor of saving all their forces for a final stand.
"I understand the situation," Wedge's holographic form flickered. *"When they are able, both Rogue Squadron and the Corona-class frigate, Serpentine will join in the fight. But I'm afraid that they are all that I can spare at the moment. Han and Leia have run into some trouble similar to yours, but they haven't managed to get a message out yet. I'm keeping a ship in reserve just in case they need to blast their way out as well."*
"Even a token force will show the people of Palanhi that they have made the right choice in supporting us," Ganner said. "In the meantime, we've successfully evacuated thirty percent of the population, but we're expecting to take heavy loses. A Yuuzhan Vong

expeditionary fleet is still a couple days out, and those reinforcements will really make things tough for us."
"Try to hang in there, Jedi Rhysode. I'm expecting the Vong commander on Pyria VI to make his move soon. The last thing I want to worry about is more Vong coming down the Namadii Corridor."
"Will do general, Rhysode out."
At the same time, the president's daughter, Doria Anshal was just finishing her conversation with General Drado, who was commanding the home fleet in orbit.
"General Antilles is sending Rogue Squadron and a frigate in support," Ganner said, stepping into the range of the holo-projector.
"That's good news," General Drado inclined his head, even as sparks showered behind him. *"But I'm afraid they will get here too late. I merely called to inform you that the battle for Palanhi has begun. The advance members of the Peace Brigade fleet have engaged us and several Vong landing craft have managed to get through in the chaos they created. They are currently en route to the main spaceport. All our forces are stretched and re cannot stop them."*
"I'll meet them there," Ganner said.
"But you are only one man!" Doria said in disbelief, while General Drado likewise uttered a similar protest.
"Not just any man," Ganner smiled at the two with a confidence he didn't feel. "I'm Ganner Rhysode."
(0) *(0)*
Ganner waited at the top of a narrow staircase that led to an empty courtyard in front of him. Behind him was the planet's main spaceport; a towering structure with docking bays bristling all around it on multiple levels. And jam-packed within were over a million scared Palanhians; all of whom were unfortunate enough to not make it off the planet in time. Transports were still taking off, but the dive-bombing attacks of Peace Brigade fighters and coralskippers had slowed the launches considerably as panicked pilots refused to take off.
Of course, as a Jedi, it was his job to make sure these million plus civilians stayed among the living.
No pressure at all.
Only a million plus lives hanging the balance.
He wondered if it was too late for a career change.
Various calming techniques failed him as the shadows of three Yuuzhan Vong heavy troop transports passed by overhead.
It was definitely too late.
Oh well, Ganner thought in amusement, it was time to show the Yuuzhan Vong that they had picked the wrong planet to invade.

The transports landed in an orderly fashion in the courtyard. Yuuzhan Vong by the hundreds began pouring out of them, filling the courtyard. Despite the overwhelming odds, Ganner activated his lightsaber without hesitation, wanting to catch the warriors' attention. It worked, but now there were hundreds of tall, scarred, tattooed, muscular warriors all staring up at him; all armed to the teeth and ready for a fight.

Good, he was too.

"I am Ganner Rhysode! Jedi of the New Republic!" Ganner declared, his voice ringing loud and clear over the sounds of the distant fighting. At the top of the stairs, he burned a line in the ground with his lightsaber, and then stepped over it. "Come on! All in a rush or one at a time, it doesn't matter! So long as I draw a breath, none shall pass this line!"

"Do-ro'ik vong pratte!" The warriors roared in answer to his challenge, shaking their amphistaffs and beginning their mass charge.

Ganner took a step forward, dropped to one knee beneath a swinging amphistaff, and proceeded to kneecap the first warrior up the stairs. The maimed Vong tumbled back down into the ones behind him.

More warriors charged, and Ganner met their attacks one after another. He could feel himself sinking into the Force, letting it guide his every movement, every beat of his heart. He couldn't sense the Vong, but he could feel the movement of the air around him, the absences they left in the Force.

A screaming warrior had his head lopped off. Another lost an arm. One stabbed Ganner in the arm with his amphistaff. Ganner gripped the weapon and thrust his own lightsaber into the offender's head. He then pulled the amphistaff out and hurled it like a javelin into another warrior. The momentum of the javelin-like throw sent the impaled warrior, and those behind him, tumbling back down the stairs.

Ganner kicked another warrior down after the others, brought the pommel of his lightsaber onto the head of another. Another warrior joined the headless fashion craze. One was split in two.

A warrior tried to grab him. Ganner flowed under the arm, removed it, then sliced the warrior right down the middle; his lightsaber blade slipping under the vonduun armor.

The warriors continued to come, scoring hits, tearing pieces of Ganner's flesh. But Ganner refused to fall. Laughing all the way, Ganner whirled about, dispatching one warrior after another. The Force flowed around him, slowing time, making the movements of each Vong seem static.

Despite the ridiculous odds, Ganner didn't feel any fear. He truly understood the power of the words he had uttered. He was a Jedi. His

life was not his but belonged to the Force. He didn't have to be a hero. He *wasn't* like Luke or Wedge or any of the others. Wasn't ridiculously strong or powerful. Just ridiculously good looking. That was enough for him. It was a shame good looks alone couldn't slay Vong.
If there was one thing he was good at though, it was pretending. Pretending to be a Jedi, to be a real hero.
Even now, as his life flashed before his eyes, all he really had to do was keep on pretending. Pretending was easy. He could pretend all he wanted, just like he had done for his entire life.
Bodies continued to fall under his blade. Pretending to be a hero wasn't all that hard.
Ganner staggered as an amphistaff was jammed through his thigh. Another jammed into his stomach. He added to his collection of severed limbs, hurling both amphistaffs at the mass of Vong warriors. A little painful maybe, but it wasn't hard at all.
He heard a dim roaring in his ears and wondered if it was his own heart yelling at him for being so stupid. Then, he realized it was something else.
Hazarding a glance over his shoulder, he nearly fell over in shock. People were pouring out of the spaceport yelling and screaming defiantly. Some waved vibroblades, others metal poles or whatever else they could get their hands on. A few had blasters. All were sprinting in his direction. The reporter from the Galactic Star, Pal'iva Konat, was leading the crowd, ready to use her holocam droid as a hammer.
Poor droid, Ganner thought with a wry smile, dodging several amphistaffs at once.
Ganner continued his attack, pressing against the warriors who dare take him on.
"For Palanhi!" Ganner bellowed
Nearly a million voices cried out in echo. "For Palanhi!"
The crowd slammed into the wall of warriors. Pal'iva's holocam droid broke over the head of a warrior that had tried to stab him. Ganner honored the droid's sacrifice by enhancing the attack with his own lightsaber. The rush of the crowd swarmed in around him.
Ganner fought on, a feeling of exhilaration overriding all other emotions.
People were being killed by the dozens, but they pressed forward, pushing down the stairs. There may have been several hundred warriors, even a thousand, but they were no match against the sheer numbers now bearing down onto them.

Warriors began disappearing beneath the mass of people. Some were even lifted into the air above the crowd, passed backwards so that those in the back of the group could join the battle as well.
Ganner didn't stop fighting. Yuuzhan Vong fell under the fast strokes of his lightsaber. Soon, the entire mob had pushed the Vong off the staircase and back towards their transports.
Several Palanhi starfighters swooped in from above, dropping bombs onto the parked craft.
The Vong warriors had nowhere to go.
As the last warrior fell, a great cheer went up from the crowd. Over a thousand bodies lay between the spaceport and the courtyard, not all of them Yuuzhan Vong.
Yet, the victory was just as loud as their cheer. High in the sky, a heavily damaged Yuuzhan Vong slaveship broke up on re-entry, burnt pieces of coral shooting through the air like meteors.
Ganner managed a smile of both relief and disbelief as he was raised onto the shoulders of the celebrating Palanhians.
"Ms. Konat," Ganner called out. "How do you think I did?"
The Twi'lek reporter rolled tearful eyes as she tried to get herself heard over the crowd. "Like you need me to boost your ego any more, Jedi Rhysode."
"It's 'Ganner'."
"Very well," Pal'iva's head-tails rippled as she reached out and gripped one of her hands. "Although after today, you'll probably be called the Hero of Palanhi."
"Hero, huh?" Ganner gazed back up at the sky. He let out a short breath of amusement, then clutched his stomach as he was painfully reminded of the wound he had received. "Who'd have thought?"
(0) *(0)*
Coruscant
Bronze slid along blue in a heated clash. A blast bug exploded above them, and both combatants sprang apart, leaping off of falling debris to propel themselves to a higher walkway. Beneath them, the battle raged, with lasers and lightsabers clashing with Yuuzhan Vong weaponry of all sorts.
No words were said as both Tahiri and the Nameless One exchanged another series of blows. Tahiri's hybrid, aggressive style met an equally unique technique wielded by her Force-sensitive Yuuzhan Vong opponent. Flurries and leaps were combined with head-on charges and rapid-fire saber slashes.
Tahiri was at a disadvantage. Though the Nameless One could both see and attack Tahiri with the Force, Tahiri couldn't do the same to the

Nameless One. Her brief moment of Vongsense hadn't returned since the Lord Nyax incident, and her inability to detect the Nameless One was slowly turning the tide of the battle.
A powerful Force push slammed into Tahiri's stomach like a sledgehammer, throwing the lithe teen backwards. Tahiri recovered by flipping with her momentum, landing in a three-point stance further down the rubble-filled walkway. The Nameless One seemed in no hurry to reach her. Tahiri took a running leap, launching herself high over the Yuuzhan Vong's head and landing on an advertising billboard above and off to the side of the walkway.
"[You say that you must fight me, but you have done little but defend,]" Tahiri called out, sweat dripping down her dust-caked face.
"[You say you are a keeper of peace, but all you have done is attack,]" The Nameless One countered smoothly, unruffled. *"[You believe that the Yuuzhan Vong are your enemy. That we bring nothing but death. But look around you. This planet had died long before we arrived. We are reviving it, giving it a life that had been suffocated by your machines. If the Jedi truly value life, then why did you let planets such as this one die? You even made it your capital, this corpse of a planet soon to be reborn.]"*
"[In taking the planet, the Yuuzhan Vong murdered billions,]" Tahiri motioned to the burnt out buildings all around them. "[Billions who wanted nothing more than to live their lives in peace.]"
"[They were taught to live at the expense of the world around them. Taught to consume and not to give back to the world that gave them life. Onimi has shown me countless worlds like this one. Dead or dying. Choking, poisoned, and desecrated, by the machines you all use to make your life easier. The True Way is in harmony with all things living. What Yun-Ne'Shel has granted us, is all we need. Your Jedi way is full of hypocrisy. You make peace through war and death. Deem some worth living more than others. Just because the children of Yuuzhan'tar are outside your Force, we are called the enemy, unnatural, vilified and hated.]"
"[So because we don't believe in the True Way, you would kill us all? Because we are deemed unfit for life by the Supreme Overlord and Onimi, we must die?]"
"[If that is the will of the gods,]" The Nameless One said with a human tilt of her head. *"[Then that is their will. I will not expect one who has turned away from the True Way to understand.]"*
"[Wanton killing is not a way of life I will ever *want* to understand.]"
"[Being blind to the suffering of a galaxy by hiding behind platitudes and quaint phrases is not a life I will ever want to understand.]"

Tahiri felt the irony of what they had just said, and it stung. "[Then I guess that is why our people fight. Because neither side wants to understand the other.]"
The Nameless One mimicked the quirk of Tahiri's lips. *"[Indeed. Perhaps, then, we should switch roles. I as the destroyer Jedi, and you as the life-giving Yuuzhan Vong. Yun-Ne'Shel has blessed us with the minds of both after all.]"*
The Nameless One propelled herself to Tahiri's position, her saber sweeping through the air. The billboard behind them was sliced in two, toppling down with a thunderous crash. Tahiri, surprised by the sudden offensive, tried to put some distance between the two of them by jumping through a window of an abandoned apartment building. The Nameless One, however, followed, using the Force to collapse walls and bat aside objects Tahiri sent flying in her wake.
Then, enhancing her speed, the Nameless One closed the distance in the blink of an eye. Her shoulder connected with Tahiri's side just as the blonde had begun to spin and meet her, and the two were thrown out the opposite window. They landed on a lower walkway, falling away from each other as they tumbled and rolled painfully over the layer of debris on the ground.
Covered in dust, grime, and debris, they rose. Each regarded the other, their faces twisted mirror reflections. Tahiri slowly reached for the coiled amphistaff hooked to her utility belt. The Nameless One pulled out an amphistaff from a strap on her back. Lightsabers reactivated in one hand. Amphistaffs snapped rigid in the other.
"[Now, we fight as Yun-Ne'Shel has always meant for us to fight. As Jedi…]" The Nameless One held up her lightsaber. *"[And as Yuuzhan Vong.]"* Her amphistaff was twirled expertly in one hand.
Tahiri made a 'bring-it-on' motion with her weapons, and the Nameless One obliged.
Back and forth, they fought, their arms blurs as they exchanged blows. Lightsaber and amphistaff hissed as they slid and clashed with each other; the fight escalating to a whole new level. The Nameless One summoned an abandoned speeder and hurled it at Tahiri.
Tahiri stood her ground and split the oncoming projectile in two with her lightsaber. With a nod of her own head, she took control of the speeder and tried to smash the Yuuzhan Vong between the two halves. The Nameless One leaped up and over the debris, coming down with both weapons outstretched. The impact of her landing sent droplets of mud flying everywhere, but Tahiri had already moved out of the way. The human Jedi slashed out with her amphistaff, sending the fanged head towards the Nameless One's neck. The Yuuzhan Vong, however,

angled her lightsaber behind her to intercept the blow, then whirled back around to lash out with her own amphistaff. Tahiri knocked aside the attack, and the two were once again trading blow after blow.
Tahiri was thrown through the air into another building opening, and rather than follow her this time, the Nameless One reached out with the Force and pulled the upper floors down onto her opponent. The entire building began to shake as its structural integrity collapsed. Just before the entire structure fell down, however, Tahiri sprung from the ruins in a spiraling distortion of amphistaff and lightsaber.
The Yuuzhan Vong had to use both of her weapons to parry the drill-like attack. Though blocked, the attack had enough momentum to cause the Yuuzhan Vong to fly backwards over another unused speeder. A Force Push to the speeder sent it after the Yuuzhan Vong. Before the Yuuzhan Vong was smashed up against the wall, the Nameless One wrested control of the speeder and crumpled it into an unrecognizable ball. Thrusting her hand out, the ball of metal debris shot out with the force of a bullet. It tore a gash in Tahiri's arm as the young teen was not quite able to completely avoid it.
Tahiri ignored the pain, embraced it, and renewed her attack on the Yuuzhan Vong. Her lightsaber cleaved glowing lines into the duracrete wall the Nameless One was pressed up against. Her amphistaff snapped out again and again, aiming for arteries into which it could inject its deadly poison.
The Nameless One pressed a hand to the weakened wall behind her and blew it inwards, giving herself an escape route. She tumbled backwards into the building and out of sight.
Tahiri edged closer to the hole and looked inside the building. It was a factory that once produced cargo skiffs and transport ships. The factory floor itself was completely dark.
"*[Tell me, One-Who-Could-Be-My-Sister. Are you any better than the Yuuzhan Vong you fight? The True Way you deny? Do you not claim to be a goddess to deceive and control?]"* The Yuuzhan Vong's voice echoed from within. *"[Have not the Shamed who have followed you exchanged one yoke for another?]"*
Tahiri didn't respond, nor did she enter the building. Instead, she stepped backwards, back onto the walkway. Several long seconds of silence fell, only the faint din of Wraith Squadron's battle echoing in the background.
Then, the ground began to rumble. Pieces of debris shook and fell over the sides of the walkway. The entire side wall of the factory erupted in a shower of metal shrapnel and duracrete. The Nameless One

emerged. Floating behind her like ready-made missiles were five almost-completed transport ships.
Tahiri swallowed apprehensively. Despite her initial confidence, she had a feeling that this was a battle she wouldn't be able to win.
(0) *(0)*
A fireball sent warriors flying everywhere and offered a momentary reprieve for the beleaguered members of Wraith Squadron. Who, because Piggy and Sharr were still on Borleias helping Jaina, and Bhindi and Baljos were now helping Coruscanti survivors, consisted only of Face, Kell, and Elassar.
"That's the last of the explosives," Kell said, emptying his blaster. "And that was my last ammo clip."
As Elassar bemoaned his lack of luck, Jan tossed Kell one of her blaster packs. "We still have another sixty to go, flyboys."
"Perfect, that's twenty for each Jedi," Face said with mock cheer. A warrior overran his position shortly after, and drove Face into a nearby wall. Face gasped for air and, through several painful punches, managed to slip an arm free to drive a vibroblade into the back of the warrior's head. Even Yuuzhan Vong were incapable of functioning with a blade severing the base of their spinal cord. Once the warrior collapsed to the ground in front of him, Face rubbed at his chest sorely. "Memo to self, get out of the way of charging Vong."
Off to the side, Danni Quee was making use of a chitin carbine she had scavenged from a dead warrior and was firing razor bugs with deadly accuracy from behind an overturned speeder.
Meanwhile, Mara, Jaden, and Kyle were in the thick of things. Their blades were a constant swirl of motion as they intercepted attacks from all sides. The number of Yuuzhan Vong was fortunately decreasing. But their attacks remained at the same intensity. Already the Jedi sported numerous injuries, among them, a nasty plasma burn on Kyle's shoulder and an amphistaff-inflicted puncture in Jaden's side.
Things were still looking up. To the astonishment of those involved, none of the coralskippers or Yuuzhan Vong space craft had investigated what had to be a very loud ruckus caused by their fight. Also a definite plus, none of them were dead yet.
Mara took a brief moment during a lull in the fighting to check up on her apprentice. There was none of the hate of anger she had expected. Instead, there was a cool purpose, sorrow, and regret. But there was also a hint of what felt like enjoyment. Deciding to puzzle over that later, Mara returned her attention to a Yuuzhan Vong warrior racing towards her. She side-stepped the amphistaff , elbowed the warrior's

already squashed nose, then whirled back around to decapitate the warrior.
They were fortunate that the warriors were not as skilled as the ones that had attacked Hapes. Their only threat was in the sheer number at which they were attacking with. There were still over fifty of them left.
Suddenly, everything changed.
The entire area was flooded with the dark side.
The three Jedi quickly retreated back to the others as a hulking form slammed down from above. Dual, staff lightsabers swung about in a whirlwind of energy, massacring the remaining warriors. Several tried to run, but the new arrival pounced on them, cutting them to shreds without another thought.
It only took a few seconds, but soon, the only ones left were the New Republic force and the new arrival.
"Great," Kyle said with a groan as the hulking figure straightened and focused on the three lightsaber-wielding Jedi. "Aunt Tahiri was right. Lord Nyax got himself a new body."
(0) *(0)*
In all the chaos, a single, frightened, eleven year old boy crawled away unnoticed. A white-knuckled grip held onto the handle of the blaster Face had given him as he slunk away on elbows and knees, head darting left and right fearfully. He emerged from the sewer pipe and out into an open field of lambent plants. He paled at the sight of the alien plant-life and was about to retreat back down into the pipe when a hand grabbed him by the scruff of his ragged outfit and lifted him into the air.
He cried out in panic and tried to bring his blaster onto the target. A powerful Yuuzhan Vong hand closed around his fist and wrested the weapon away from him. He was turned until he faced a heavily scarred and very cross warrior.
"Where did you find this weapon!" The warrior snarled in accented Basic, brandishing the blaster in Tarc's face.
"In…in…in the sewers," Tarc stammered.
"Great One!" A Shamed One hurried to the scene. "Forgive me for losing track of this one, Great One. He is one of the slaves I was supposed to tend."
The warrior backhanded the Shamed One, sending her to the ground. He waved the confiscated blaster at her. "You fool! He has an infidel weapon! I should kill the both of you and spare the overseers the pain of having to deal with you."

"It will not happen again," the Shamed One babbled in Basic accented worse than the warrior's. "I will ensure that the slave is punished for this transgression."
With an apathetic 'humph,' the warrior threw Tarc onto the now prostrated Shamed One. "You are fortunate that the gods have me leaving this post for the front lines tomorrow. I will let you be the next task-master's problem."
"Thank you for your mercy."
The warrior ignored her and stormed back through the fields, not paying either of them a second glance.
Still shaking, Tarc looked fearfully at the Shamed One. To his surprise, however, the Shamed One smiled at him. In almost perfect Basic, she held out her hand to him. "Do not worry. I will not harm you. My name is Taan. What is yours?"
(0) Chapter End *(0)*
A\N: Hope you enjoyed the action-packed chapter, I had fun writing it...Things kinda slow down in the next chapter, but not by much. Next chapter sets up the Ylesia story arc and concludes the Palanhi and Coruscanti arcs. Only two more chapters to go for the Rebel Stand storyline altogether.
The Nameless One is identified as Vongerella in the Star Wars wiki, but her background with Onimi is something I came up with since she lacked a canon history.
For those who want more Danni or Jacen, they *will* have more active roles in the Destiny's Way arc of this story. Considering that at this point in canon Jacen was being tortured on Coruscant and Danni had the role of creepy Yuuzhan Vong spy magnet, I didn't have much to go off of. This arc was planned with Anakin, Tahiri, and Jaina in mind and anything more negatively affected the pace I was trying to keep.
Currently writing chapter 46, the second or third to the last chapter of my Book 2 of the Heretic trilogy. My version of the Final Prophecy will probably start at chapter 51 at the earliest. It will take us about four-five chapters, and then I get to finally wrap up this saga with an eight-eleven chapter Unifying Force! So yeah, I surpassed my previous estimate and will most likely go over 60 chapters. I...am...insane. I suppose no one will mind if I take a long break from writing the sequel after I finish this story? It more than likely won't be up until next year anyway =).
Returning to weekly updates for the rest of this month.
Review if you so desire...

ADA 18

Eighteen
(0) *(0)*
Coruscant
Mara, Kyle, and Jaden had their work cut out for them, literally. Lightsaber blades, moving faster than their eyes could keep up with, sliced through the air all around them in a deadly dance. Only their Force-assisted movements prevented them from ending up like the dead Vong warriors all around them.
"Ideas!" Jaden yelled, twisting away as his voice attracted Lord Nyax's attention. To make matters worse, the three Jedi were running into the same problem Tahiri had with her own opponent. They couldn't sense Lord Nyax in the Force. Lord Nyax, however, could definitely sense them.
The dark Jedi's soul, after losing its old body, had somehow found a new, behemoth of a body. A new body that might as well have, 'made by Yuuzhan Vong shapers,' stamped across it in bright, big, bold letters. His body looked to be an amalgam of several different creatures. His head was human, but it had Yuuzhan Vong plaeryin bols for eyes and a serpent-like tongue. Standing at just over two and a quarter meters tall, and as wide as a Gamorean, Lord Nyax's Vong-enhanced insanity was only made all the more lethal by the pair of dual bladed lightsabers wielded in his spike-covered hands. The lightsabers were by no means new—relics of a bygone era—but they lived once more, as efficient as they were nearly a century ago; lighting up the darkness in hues of blood red and gold.
"Thinking!" Kyle called back.
"Great, I'm doomed," Jaden groaned, rolling under a double sweep of both blades. He quickly backpedalled as Lord Nyax stalked towards him.
"I've got a plan!" Kyle said, using the Force to throw several pieces of debris at Lord Nyax's hulking form. Once he got the dark Jedi's attention, Kyle made a leaping attack that was promptly rejected.
"We're listening!" Mara replied, grimacing as she picked herself back up after being hit by a large piece of Force-thrown debris.
"Part one, we don't die!" Kyle panted, now under a fast pace barrage from the deranged Jedi.
"Check!" Jaden confirmed, relieving his master by drop-kicking Lord Nyax in the back.
Lord Nyax didn't appreciate it. Not even turning toward the second attacker, Lord Nyax used a massive Force shove to throw Jaden

through a shop window. While Mara took up the slack, Kyle darted in after his apprentice to check on him.
He lifted off a piece of debris and helped Jaden back to his feet. "Part two, we don't get thrown through any more windows or buildings."
"Are you sure we should come up with a plan of our own?" Jaden wiped his forehead and winced as his hand came in contact with a deep gash. "We can always ask Jan."
"Ask Jan how to fight a lightsaber wielding maniac who…we left to Mara…" Kyle and Jaden both Force-sped out of the store and rejoined the battle.
"So what was part three?" Jaden yelled, nearly receiving a haircut.
"Part three, you and Mara be bait," Kyle said.
"I think we need a new plan," Mara managed darkly.
Just when the three of them began to surround Lord Nyax, helped by pot-shots taken by the Wraiths, Lord Nyax suddenly unleashed a wave of Force energy that threw everyone to the ground.
And kept them there.
Every member of the New Republic task force facing Lord Nyax suddenly found themselves unable to move. A split second later, they began to relive their worst memories and feel their worst fears.
Kyle went down to the ground hard, gasping as unwanted images began flashing through his head. The painful moments when he thought that Jan had been killed. The loss of his father.
Turning dark.
A voice wormed its way into his mind. Feelings of power, of raw strength, coursed through his mind.
Anger. Pride. He was much more powerful than anyone else, even Skywalker. He could be the next Dark Lord of the Sith if he wanted and no one could stop him. He could have everything he desired.
Then, just as suddenly, the feelings dissipated, leaving him gasping for air. A bead of sweat dripped off his nose as he tried to regain his senses.
With help from his reciprocal apprenticeship bond with Mara, Kyle suddenly felt his mind free of whatever had been attacking him.
And just in time too. At the sound of a familiar hum spearing downwards, he jerked his head to the side; eyes bulging at the sight of a crimson blade superheating the dirt into a small pit of glowing glass right next to him. He began to roll in the other direction, and was bracketed by a gold blade. Fortunately, he managed to sit up just as Lord Nyax's scissored the two blades together, the beams hissing behind him.

Unfortunately, Lord Nyax's loin cloth was the only thing in his immediate sight.

Launching into a scrambling crawl between Lord Nyax's legs, Kyle summoned his weapon back into his hand. But before he could activate it, the dark Jedi lashed out with a powerful kick, catching the Jedi Master in the face. The Force-assisted impact from a muscular leg several times the thickness of his head had Kyle sliding backwards through the dirt seeing stars.

By then, however, both Mara and Jaden had thrown off the combined Force attacks Lord Nyax had been using to subdue them. Quickly, they attacked the deranged dark Jedi from both sides. Lord Nyax met their attacks with spinning blades. He forced both on the defensive, the plaeryin bols in his eye-sockets releasing a spray of venom. The liquid singed both Jedi, and they dropped back even further.

"New plan needed," Jaden said, tearing off a sleeve of his combat jumpsuit that was still smoking from Lord Nyax's toxins.

Lord Nyax took a step forward.

A lightsaber blade shot out of his chest.

To the surprise of everyone, it didn't even faze the dark Jedi. Instead, Kyle was lifted up off the ground by a bone crushing wave of Force energy, gagging as his lungs were also constricted. His lightsaber flickered out and fell back to the ground.

Mara and Jaden tried to help, but Lord Nyax continued to hold Kyle in the air while meeting their attacks, not yielding a single centimeter of ground.

But, even Lord Nyax had his limits. Concentrating on fighting two puny Jedi, while crushing the life out of a third, he had completely overlooked the much weaker humans hiding behind the rubble. One of those weaker humans happened to be carrying a very powerful sniper rifle. Though it had needed some assembly, without a mad horde of Yuuzhan Vong rushing at them, the Jedi had brought more than enough time. While both Mara and Jaden locked blades with the dark Jedi, the members of Wraith Squadron, plus Jan and Danni, all lined up their shots.

They had seen Lord Nyax take a lightsaber blade to the chest and still live, so there was only one obvious target left.

The command to fire passed through their minds via the Force, an image of their hands squeezing the trigger. In that second, Jaden and Mara sliced Lord Nyax's dual-bladed lightsabers in two, and then promptly re-engaged the working halves. Lord Nyax was in no position to block the lasers even if he knew that they were coming.

A flash of light followed by a deafening roar that temporarily drowned out the hissing of the lightsabers.
A massive release of Force energy created a vortex that sent debris flying high into the air.
All three Jedi collapsed to the ground.
Lord Nyax's headless body swayed for a moment, before it too came crashing down.
Jan immediately abandoned her cover and ran to Kyle's still form as pieces of duracrete and Vong body parts rained down around them.
"Kyle!"
"He'll be all right," Elassar said, frowning as he examined Kyle's body from the opposite side. "We just need to get him into a bacta tank."
Jan looked up sharply. "We're on Coruscant, Elassar! What happens if there *isn't* one available?"
Elassar paused, frowning in realization. "Then he won't be so 'all right'. Multiple bone fractures, internal bleeding, punctured lung, and that's just what I can tell without any equipment. I recommend we either find a functioning medical facility or not take any more side trips and find a way off this planet."
Face nodded grimly. Motioning to Lord Nyax's headless form, he looked to Mara. "Jedi Skywalker, is that thing really dead this time?"
"His spirit didn't get a chance to escape before you blasted him and I didn't sense…"
"Master Skywalker?" Face frowned as Mara promptly jerked her head up towards the higher levels while clutching her stomach.
"Tahiri!"
(0) *(0)*
Tahiri gasped, blinding pain erupting from her midsection. Her lightsaber fell from her hand and rolled off over the ledge. The only thing that had kept the Nameless One's blade from severing her spine was that she had twisted the moment that she felt the blade enter her body. Not that it didn't lessen the damage.
Or the pain.
Maybe it would have been better to be paralyzed. At the moment, she wasn't much of a believer of the Vong doctrine that pain was a sacred experience.
"[You fought well She-Who-Could-Have-Been-My-Sister.]" The Nameless One reached up with a hand to caress Tahiri's check, a single finger stretching out to trace the three scars on her forehead.
The Yuuzhan Vong was not without her own injuries. Among the most serious of her injuries was a bloodied eye-socket, the eyeball completely destroyed by a flying shard of duracrete. Not that it had

done Tahiri any good. The Nameless One had simply been too powerful. *"[But today the gods deem that I should be the winner of the fight.]"*
There was a hiss-snap as the Nameless One deactivated her lightsaber. The blade left Tahiri's body and retreated back into the hilt. Tahiri immediately collapsed to her knees, staring up at the alien face of someone so like her, but yet so different all the same. Tears stung at her eyes, but she refused to shed them.
"Will you kill me now?"
The Nameless One began to say something, but then stopped, sensing something in the emotions flowing from Tahiri. Cocking her head, the Nameless One asked a question different from the one she had intended. *"[You are feeling sorrow, regret. Why? Your skills have impressed even the gods. Had you faced anyone else, you would have no doubt been the victor. Dying at my hand is nothing to feel sad about.]"*
Tahiri managed a faint smile. "But…I have someone to return to. You will be denying me that return."
The Nameless One mimicked Tahiri's expression, as if trying to convey the same emotion. *"[I too have someone to return to.]"*
"Onimi." Tahiri kept both hands on her stomach, she could feel her strength leaving her.
"[Onimi.]" The Nameless One confirmed, staring down at Tahiri's kneeling form. *"[What you feel for the one you desire to return to, I feel for Onimi. Though it is a feeling one as low as I should not have.]"*
"Will you let me return then?" Tahiri whispered, green eyes still sparkling with tears. "[I had thought I had lost him. But he still lives.]"
"[Tell me, what is his name? Who is your 'Onimi'?]"
"[His name is Anakin,]" Tahiri breathed. "Anakin Solo."
"[Anakin Solo.]" The Nameless One repeated the name, as if testing the sound of it. *"[My master has spoken of him. He finds it funny how the Shamed see him as Yun-Ne'Shel when you are clearly the more sensible choice. He talks of Anakin Solo often, with great respect. You say you are the intended of this Anakin Solo?]"*
Tahiri, no longer having any strength to stay on her knees, rolled onto her back instead. She still managed to nod in answer. "[If he will have me.]
"[Then he is indeed like Onimi. Accepting of all of Yun-Ne'Shel's creations. Bringing balance to a galaxy plunged into darkness.]"
Tahiri laughed weakly. "[You approve of him.]"
"[Yes, She-Who-Could-Have-Been-My-Sister,]" The Nameless One chortled softly, hooking her lightsaber to her belt. *"[If he is truly as you*

say. Accepting of all of you and not just your human or Jeedai parts, then I approve. Return to him and tell him that Onimi cannot wait to meet him. It will be during that fight that you and I will face off once more. It will be then when the balance of Yun-Ne'Shel's galaxy shall be decided. So rest and improve your skills. It will be a day this galaxy will long remember.]"

(0) *(0)*

Borleias, Pyria System

Shaeri limped through the hallways of the Borleias biotics facility without a purpose. The ordeal she had gone through while a prisoner of the Yuuzhan Vong had left her lame and partially blind. The nerve damage was serious and would take much time to heal. The severity of her wounds had been one of the reasons she hadn't been allowed to accompany the avatar of her goddess Yun-Shuno back to Yuuzhan'tar.

Shaeri dragged her foot along the ground cold metal ground behind her. The crutches given to her by the Jedi healer aided Shaeri's every movement. While her body mended itself, she could no longer fight. No longer acquire information from stealth. She had allowed herself to be taken prisoner. Had to have her goddess come rescue her. Shaeri stopped and stared hatefully at her dead foot, of which she could only see a hazy outline.

She truly was the definition of a Shamed One.

She had to find some way to remain of use to her goddess. Preferably before Tahiri returned from her pilgrimage from Yuuzhan'tar. She had to make her goddess see that, despite her injuries, she could still serve her. Even if it was just to act as a body shield, at least she could then die in the service of Yun-Shuno.

Since Tahiri and Anakin, as well as Jedi Mara, were away, many of the Freed Ones had remained in the shelter that had been constructed for them. There was no sense provoking a reaction from the refugees or soldiers, who still blamed them for the actions of the warriors and priests. But there had been only so much studying of Basic, so many times she could mentally review fighting stances her body could no longer do, that Shaeri could take. She supposed she was fortunate enough that her crippled form invoked pity from the Warmaster Antilles, enough so that she was allowed to walk through the hallways unmolested. It was not pity she wanted, though. She could not call herself Free if she could not do more.

Her musings had taken her through one of the lower levels of Borleias. Normally the lower levels were forbidden to all but the highest of ranks, as evident by the number of security doors and various alarms that ran about the sides of the hallway. The hallway itself, however,

was relatively low-security. The trek from the shelter, through the building, and down the stairs had taken a lot out of her, so she paused to catch her breath. She leaned against a nearby wall, setting the armpit-aching crutch aside.
She jerked in surprise.
The section of the wall she had placed her hand against had not felt like the cool, unfeeling duracrete-and-metal surface of the rest of the wall she was leaning against.
She pulled back and carefully examined the segment. Slowly, she ran her hand along the surrounding surface, then back over the off-feeling section once more.
The small portion of wall flashed in several vibrant colors, before showing the keypad on the opposite side of the hallway. A split second later, it showed hands moving across the keys, tapping in the access code for the high security area.
Shaeri whirled back around towards the compromised keypad and door, her heart pounding in understanding. She limped over to the keypad. With a shaking hand, another gift from her time as a prisoner, she pressed the keys that had been displayed on the spy-patch.
The door slid open with a hiss.
At the same time, a figure was making his way out from a hole in the floor.
The two froze.
"Yuuzhan Vong," Shaeri hissed in recognition.
"[Shamed traitor!]" The figure climbing out of the hole snarled back. He hoisted himself out of the hole in a single move, and tried to stab her with a vibroblade.
Shaeri shifted, trapping the blade between the open spaces of her crutch, then twisted her crutch to the side, tearing the blade out of his hand.
The Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator lunged at her with his bare hands. Shaeri awkwardly ducked under and out of the way, cursing her lame leg for keeping her movements slow. She knew she couldn't win the fight. Nor would she be able to run in her condition. So, she did the next best thing.
While the warrior recovered his balance, she flung herself at the keypad by the door. She jabbed a random selection of buttons, and immediately alarms blared throughout the corridor. The Yuuzhan Vong's head jerked up at the klaxon alarms and flashing red lights that lined the hallway.
"[You'll die for that!]"

"[At least you're coming with me. Then we can see who the gods truly favor!]" Shaeri deflected the fist the warrior threw at her and then attacked with the only weapon she had left. She lunged at his neck and bit down hard. The stale, coppery taste of the infiltrator's blood filled her mouth, making her want to vomit, but she continued to bite down even as the other Yuuzhan Vong began punching her head.
Alarmed voices echoed down from one end of the hallway.
"Damn it! This is Wolam! Get the security team over here now! Wait, Tam!"
Another figure joined the fight, shoulder tackling the Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator. Shaeri was torn from her target by the impact of the tackle, and collapsed to the ground, head spinning.
There were several grunts and gasps as the other two fought right next to her. She saw the vibroblade she had wrested from the warrior on the ground beside her. Despite the pinpricks in her body, she crawled to the blade. Her fingers just managed to wrap around the hilt when she heard the warrior crow victoriously. She looked over her shoulder and saw that the human who had saved her was pinned under the warrior's larger form. The warrior had his hands around the human's neck and seemed intent on strangling the life out of him.
Too weak to move any further, Shaeri made eye contact with the human and slid the vibroblade across the ground to him. The human groped for the blade, found it, then drove it into the Yuuzhan Vong's chest. The warrior emitted a surprised, rasping sound, then collapsed on top of the human.
More figures emerged from the end of the hallway. This time a woman Shaeri vaguely recognized as the partner of Warmaster Antilles, she could never pronounce her name correctly, stepped forward. The woman, and the security team with her, rolled the dead warrior off the human who had saved her. After checking on the human, who passed out from pain, the Antilles-woman knelt down next to her.
"You just seem to get yourself into all sorts of scrapes, don't you?" The woman's smile was gentle.
"I follow my goddess," Shaeri responded, the world still swaying, making her nauseous.
The woman chuckled softly. "That you do. Hang in there, there's a med-team coming."
"Sleep now," Shaeri's eyes fluttered shut as she too passed out.
(0) *(0)*
Palanhi, Palanhi System
Colonel Gavin Darklighter stood before the holoprojector onboard the Palanhi flagship *Indigo,* with Captain Fayykarya, the Wookie captain of

the *Corona*-class frigate, the *Serpentine,* and Jedi Ganner Rhysode on either side of him. Opposite were General Drado, the daughter of the president of Palanhi, Doria Anshal, and several other members of Palanhi's navy.
"What most people do not know is that Palanhi uses the Galactic Star's galactic-wide comm-relays to take snap-shots of the systems they are in. Because of this, we know that the Yuuzhan Vong expeditionary force coming to reinforce the Peace Brigade and other Vong survivors will arrive no earlier than tomorrow. The Peace Brigade and their Vong allies have holed up on the last planet in the system," General Drado motioned to a section of the holographic read-out.
"It is a small mining world," Doria Anshal continued the briefing. "With many subterranean tunnels but no atmosphere. The bulk of the population reside in sealed habitats clustered around mineral rich mines. We know that the Peace Brigade Commander General has left the system and left one of his subordinates in charge. Likewise, the original Vong commander was killed in their failed attempt to take Palanhi, and one of his subordinates has taken over. Since the planet is devoid of civilians at the moment, it is my hope that we can finish off these remnants of the Vong and Peace Brigade forces before the reinforcements arrive."
"And that's where we come in?" Gavin said.
"Palanhi may have advanced ships and our personal navy. But we lack experienced crew or commanders. We're more used to fighting off pirate raids than an actual army." Doria nodded. "In your considerable experience, Colonel, how do you think we can best take this planet without significant loses?"
"If the network of tunnels is as extensive as this image shows, we're going to need a ground assault no matter what we do," Gavin magnified the tunnels going under the compounds. "But for the space battle, despite the losses the Peace Brigade and Vong took, they are still more than a threat for what we have. Do we have an estimate as to how many of their ships made it out?"
"We destroyed most of them," a Palanhi officer reported, reading off a datapad. "From various reports, we have two squadrons of Vong fighters, one of Peace Brigade. Two corvettes, both Vong. A Peace Brigade battleship, though it was damaged, and six modified cargo and other vessels used by the Peace Brigade or their allies. Intel suggests that forces may have been kept in reserve, so their numbers will be slightly higher upon engaging them."
"It's important that we hit there hard, now, before they have a chance to entrench themselves any further on the planet," Gavin murmured,

stroking his goatee. "Okay. We'll have General Drado's flag, escorted by the *Serpentine* and Rogue Squadron lead the attack. Naturally, we'll be the main target since the enemy will want to break the morale of our forces. From the opposite side of the planet, we'll micro-jump half of the Palanhi forces under a leader of your choosing. While the Peace Brigade and Vong are engaging us, this new force can go to ground and capture or kill any leaders."
"From the way you're looking at me, I'm guessing I'll be in this group?" Ganner said.
"You'll be more effective on the ground," Gavin confirmed. "Also, we outnumber the enemy several times over, even if they did keep ships in reserve, so it's mostly a matter of keeping casualties at a bare minimum. With you leading the ground assault, you can do the things you Jedi are so good at doing."
"Alright, I'm in."
"Your injuries do not bother you?" Doria said in concern, motioning to the swath of bacta patches decorating Ganner's body like military medals.
"Jedi heal fast," Ganner responded glibly. "Are *you* sure that the Vong reinforcements won't be here until tomorrow?"
"Even they can't bend the laws of hyperspace travel," Doria said. She suddenly looked nervous as she looked to the New Republic representatives. "They can't, right?"
Ganner and Gavin glanced uneasily at each other. "Not that we're aware of."
"Then tomorrow night is the earliest possible time they can arrive. We've already plotted possible exit points for the fleet and are making preparations. Once we begin our attack today, we'll also jam all transmissions to and from this system. As far as the Vong reinforcements will know, they're still coming out with friendlies in the area."
"We'll start the transfer of materials for the ground assault." A Palanhi officer motioned to several of his colleagues, and they bowed out of the meeting.
Gavin motioned to the holographic image in front of him. "Once we mop up the last of their ships, our fighters can make strafing runs on the more hardened pockets of resistance."
"Sounds like a plan," Ganner nodded amiably. "And for once, I actually like the odds."
(0) *(0)*
Yuuzhan Vong Worldship, Coruscant Orbit

Inwardly, the traitorous former senator Viqi Shesh reeled back as if struck. Outwardly, however, she offered an insincere smile towards the Yuuzhan Vong Warmaster, Tsavong Lah. "Forgive me your grace. I know that I am just your servant, but do you truly feel that I will be of use to you on Ylesia?"
"Indeed. Your forked tongue and skills in politics is just what our Peace Brigade allies need at the moment. They need a leader, someone to unite them and make them efficient. You have skills manipulating people. You can even recognize when someone else is being manipulated, as you have proven by rooting out the plot against me by the priests and shapers. I will send you with Denua Ku and his band of warriors to make the Peace Brigade strong, worthy enough of my goodwill. You will increase their numbers and make the rest of the galaxy view them favorably."
Tsavong Lah waved a hand at one of his attendants, and the warrior brought over a small pouch. Tsavong pulled out its contents. "This should be familiar to you, Viqi Shesh. We had one implanted in the agent on Borleias, the one you were supervising until recently."
A small note of panic sounded in Viqi's mind as she eyed the slaveseed. "Warmaster, surely it is not necessary?"
"Oh, but it is. I will not send you from my sight without some insurance. This is to remind you of your duty to me and a punishment should you begin to consort with my enemies or try to run."
Viqi licked her lips, finding her mouth dry. To be sent to a backwater planet with a bunch of fanatics, all the while watched by the Warmaster's pet guard dog, was not Viqi's idea of fun. Neither was the slaveseed, which would make escaping the hell she had made herself all but impossible. "I…I will do as you command, Warmaster. The Peace Brigade will become stronger than they are now and deliver you many more Jedi. But, have I not proven myself loyal to you? I swear to you that I will not run or conspire against you. In fact, implanting me with a slaveseed will only hinder my attempts to improve the Peace Brigade."
"Explain."
"The current Peace Brigade leadership will never see me as equal or superior to them if I am the slave of another. Of course, I am your loyal servant. But if I were to go to them as a slave of the Yuuzhan Vong, something less than even the lowly Shamed Ones, they will never obey me. I must be someone worthy of both their respect and loyalty." As she spoke, the ideas continued to come to her. "I will not dare to tell you how to manage your operations, but when I am on Ylesia, it will be helpful to the both of us if Denua Ku is subordinate to me. In secret, he can remain your faithful servant. But in public on Ylesia, my position

will be greatly aided by having Yuuzhan Vong warriors answer to me and not the other way around."
Tsavong Lah's face betrayed no emotion, but the tone of his response was lethal. "You would have me put a Yuuzhan Vong beneath you?"
"Yes, Warmaster," Viqi said boldly. The realization that she would be able to keep her life because she was still of some use to him emboldening her. "Besides, if he is to watch me, instead of fight on the front lines, he is obviously not a warrior of great honor or skill in the first place."
"Were he here to hear that, he would slit your throat."
"But he is not here."
Tsavong let out a bark of a laugh and inclined his head, smiling crookedly. "That he is not. Very well, you shall not be implanted with a slaveseed yet." The Warmaster's smile disappeared. "But know that if should cross me, Denua Ku has orders to take your life in my name."
"I would never be foolish enough to betray you, Warmaster," Viqi said deferentially.
"See that you aren't. If you are successful in this assignment, I will let you spend the rest of your days on Ylesia as its ruler."
Viqi swallowed. "You are gracious, Warmaster."
"Now leave. The ship that takes you and Denua Ku's squad departs for Ylesia tomorrow evening. You will also have Shamed Ones attending you in addition to Denua Ku's warriors. I expect nothing but success, Viqi Shesh."
"And success you shall have, Warmaster Lah."
(0) *(0)*
Borleias, Pyria System
"Jag, a moment of your time."
"What can I do for you, Great One?"
Jaina hesitated, her resolve crumbling as she saw Jag patiently wait for her. "You know what, never mind."
"If you say so." Jag inclined his head politely and turned to continue down the hallway.
"No wait," Jaina said quickly, taking several long strides to reach him. Jag paused again.
"Force, this is awkward." Jaina breathed, shaking her head at the ceiling. "Okay, look. You know how you told me how I needed to get my emotions sorted out?"
"Not in so many words, but yes."
"This is about that," Jaina gripped one of her arms. "I really don't have anyone to talk to about this. But considering, well, everything, you're also the best person for me to talk to about this."

"Then should we discuss this in your quarters?"
"Right, my quarters," Jaina laughed faintly, she motioned and they began to walk back down the hallway. "I am going insane."
"Lack of sleep has the same affect."
"Thank you Dr. Fel."
"Diagnosing insanity is but one of the many skills I possess," Jag said straight-faced. "I believe the saying is: it takes one to know one."
"So from one insane person to another," Jaina began offhandedly, trying to make it seem like the topic didn't really hold a great deal of meaning for her. "What would you consider is the better situation? Not hurting anyone by dying, because you weren't close to anyone in the first place. Or hurting many people by dying because you were close to them all?"
"I would think it a difficult task to keep everyone at arms-length," Jag replied neutrally. Jaina grimaced, he obviously hadn't been fooled. "The energy you expend trying to keep them away, could be better spent trying to stay alive. Then they won't have a reason to grieve in the first place."
"Okay, then. Would *you* rather keep everyone at arms-length so *their* deaths wouldn't hurt you? Or would you allow them to get close knowing their dying would hurt really bad?"
Jag glanced sidelong at her as she inputted the code to the door to her quarters. "The pain of losing them would eventually be countered by the good memories of that person. It is the difference between existing as a cold, unfeeling machine, and living your life. Pain lets us know that we're alive, but it also tells us that the person who died had a meaningful life that in someway affected our own. Caring for someone only increases their chances of survival because they have you, or whoever else, to look after them."
They stepped into her quarters. Jaina sat at the edge of her bed while Jag snagged the chair from the desk and dragged it over so that he was sitting across from her.
"And for the big question," Jaina whispered, staring at a location over Jag's shoulder. "Is having a relationship in a time of war worth it at all?"
"I suppose it all depends on the people involved." Jag replied, just as soft. "If one or the other dies, the survivor should not have any regrets about the relationship. The times shared should be worth it no matter how long or short. If the feelings the two shared ran deep, then a relationship would add a touch of lightness to a war tinged with too much sorrow."
"Would *you* enter a relationship?" Brandy brown eyes uncertainly held the Clawcraft pilot's steady gaze.

"Again, it would all depend on the person involved," Jag replied evenly. "She would have to be as certain of her feelings for me as I am of my own for her. She would have to have no regrets should anything happen. But most importantly…"
He paused, and Jaina leaned forward slightly, encouraging him to continue. "Yes?"
Jag cracked a small smile. "She would have to be a worse flyer then I am. There is no possible way I could be with someone who could make me look bad in my starfighter."
Jaina let out a small laugh and rose from the bed, making her way over to a now standing Jag. "I guess I don't count then. I can fly circles around you any day, Fel."
"You are fortunate I do not count dreams then," Jag retorted.
Jaina lightly slugged his arms. "Fine, I guess I can let you win a couple of times. You know, for your male ego's sake."
"I take it you would not object if I were to kiss you now?"
"Try and find out," Jaina said, tilting her head back as she leaned against him.
Always ready for the next adventure, Jag cocked an eyebrow. "As my Goddess commands."
(0) *(0)*
Palanhi, Palanhi System
Even with the ships the Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong had kept in reserve, the battle had been over relatively quick. Per Colonel Gavin Darklighter's instruction, the Palanhi navy concentrated all their fire on the Yuuzhan Vong vessels while Rogue Squadron and the New Republic frigate repelled Peace Brigade runs. Once the organic alien ships were dead in space, nearly all of the surviving Peace Brigade vessels jumped out of the system. Those that didn't were promptly shredded to pieces.
The ground battle had been a little harder, as the Peace Brigade had proven very adept at hiding in cold, dark places, and had left their Yuuzhan Vong counterparts to launch several waves of suicide charges. After barely withstanding the first few waves, Ganner came up with a new plan. Through the ingenious use of several mining vehicles, the remaining Yuuzhan Vong proved no match for the massive boring lasers and drill tips that met their charge. The Peace Brigade hiding within the tunnels likewise flooded out in panic when Ganner, and the Palanhi general in charge of the ground forces, began using the bore-lasers and massive, drill machines to collapse the said tunnels.
"The forty prisoners will be transferred back to Palanhi and tried as enemies of the state," General Fairn said calmly to the gathered

HoloNet reporters. "Despite the Yuuzhan Vong attacks, our casualties are relatively light, with only seventy wounded and twelve dead."
The entire battle and liberation of mining planet MX33P41 was recorded by reporters from the Galactic Star in painstaking detail. The galactic media giant was using the battle as proof that the Yuuzhan Vong and their allies could be fought and beaten. Of course, the footage wouldn't be beamed throughout the galaxy until after the Vong reinforcements arrived, for obvious reasons. But the Galactic Star's reporters were very studious in recording every single Yuuzhan Vong vessel being destroyed for the morale of everyone throughout the galaxy, and they were anxious to film more.
Despite any doubts about having reporters in an active battle zone, with fears of security risks and other dangers, the Galactic Star's newly promoted Chief of Reporting and Field-Operations, Pal'iva Konat had successfully convinced the Palanhi military to allow the filming of the battle and the embedding of reporters within the ground forces. Some broadcasting companies might have monopolized such a story, but Pal'iva invited reporters from other news outlets from all around the galaxy. She was even having the Galactic Star run documentaries on the Jedi and on the war itself, in the lead up to the eventual broadcast of the actual battle.
While the Palanhi general catered to one group of reporters, another group clustered around the lone Jedi on the ground.
"Jedi Rhysode, can you explain why the New Republic only sent one Jedi, a frigate, and a squadron of fighters to support the Palanhi people?"
"Jedi Rhysode, did you know that the people on Palanhi are calling the mark you left in front of their space port the 'Line of Rhysode'?"
"Do you truly think this war can be won?"
"Over here, Jedi Rhysode! Are the rumors true? Are you involved in a secret Jedi cult with plans to take over the galaxy? And have you really fathered the next Palpatine with Mara Jade Skywalker?"
Though most people would have been overwhelmed by the countless flashbulbs and holocam lights trained on their face, Ganner simply offered his most charming smile. Holding out his hands, and using the Force to help silence the barrage of questions, he winked at a camera floating by to get a close up and motioned to the first reporter.
"One at a time please. I may be skilled, but even I can only answer one question at a time," Ganner said jovially. "So let's see if I can't answer the questions I heard in order. So, for the good man in the back. The New Republic has the greatest respect for the capabilities of their allies. The fighter squadron you mentioned is Rogue Squadron, hardly

just another run of the mill token show of support. The people of Palanhi are more than capable of protecting themselves. We were confident in the people of Palanhi's desire to be free, and that confidence was not misplaced. Rogue Squadron and the frigate Serpentine merely ran interference while the Palanhi navy cleaned up the invaders. As for whether I think the war can be won? Well, if battles keep going the way this one has, you bet."
Ganner groaned as he watched the playback of his interview. "'You bet'? I really said something like that?"
"Look on the bright side," Pal'iva snickered, her image on the holographic transmitter flickering slightly. *"At least it wasn't a live broadcast. By the time everything airs in another, oh, couple of hours or so, they'll be having you admit that you were a part of that Jedi cult planning galactic domination with the love-child of Mara Jade Skywalker."*
"Yeah, about that. How *did* that reporter get into the pool in the first place?"
Pal'iva smiled a toothy grin. *"I thought you could use some fun reporting for once. Too many serious questions are bad for you."*
"And they're really calling that line I burned on the ground the 'Line of Rhysode?'"
"They have a forcefield emitter around it to preserve the integrity of the stone," Pal'iva confirmed dryly, rolling her eyes.
"You reporter people are really scary, you know."
"*Scarier than the Vong?"*
"The Vong can't make me a member of a doomsday cult, have me fathering kids with Master Skywalker, or accuse me of being a moron and having the entire galaxy believe in it."
"It's a good thing you got me on your side then."
"Much deadlier than an army of ships," Ganner nodded in agreement. Then his smile faded. "Although, you do know that your support of the Jedi and the New Republic is only going to make Palanhi a big target?"
"We know," Pal'iva said reassuringly. *"It's why the Galactic Star is moving our headquarters to a mobile HQ. We're transferring to a privately own Star Destroyer that's just finished being refitted. We even spent a good bit of our budget making sure it had the most advanced shields and weapons money can be. Doria Anshal also chipped in some funds from Palanhi's treasury to purchase a squadron of fighters for the ship as well."*
"Privately owned Star Destroyer…" Ganner trailed off. "No way!"
"No way?"
"You're transferring your operations to the *Errant Venture?*"

"You know of it?"
"It's the *only* privately owned Star Destroyer," Ganner laughed aloud. "Wow, the Force really does have a sense of humor."
The lights in his quarters dimmed, then returned to full strength. Shortly after, an announcement filled the ship.
"All hands, report to ready stations. Yuuzhan Vong will be arriving in ten minutes."
"I heard that," Pal'iva said. *"Take care of yourself, Jedi Rhysode."*
"Back to 'Jedi Rhysode' again?"
"You want me to call you by your first name on a more permanent basis, you have to take me out to dinner first."
"When I get back then," Ganner gave her a brief salute, then closed the channel. With silence filling his quarters, he took a moment to compose himself. The Palanhi leadership was confident in their initial plan to take out the newly arrived Vong. Perhaps too confident. Their fallback plan was very extreme and had made Ganner question their sanity upon hearing it.
Since when did blowing up an entire planet become an acceptable Plan B? That was the fate of the ball of rock known as MX33P41 should the Yuuzhan Vong gain the upper hand. Using the mining equipment, explosives had been placed at the center of the planet, turning it into one deadly fragmentation grenade.
Though it would probably look good for the holocams recording the battle, both the president's daughter and Colonel Darklighter agreed that blowing up a planet wasn't exactly the best of options. If the Yuuzhan Vong fleet was winning, however, that really was the only option they had left.
Palanhi Intel estimated the approximate arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet based off of interrogations of the Peace Brigade prisoners as well as the last known trajectories of the fleet from comm buoys. If everything went right, the Vong fleet would arrive and immediately be hammered from three sides.
Ganner exhaled, refreshing himself with the Force. He then left his quarters and made his way to the bridge.
"General Drado."
"Jedi Rhysode, thank you for joining us."
"All ships are in position?"
"They are. The Yuuzhan Vong won't stand a chance."
"That's not overconfidence I hear, is it?" Ganner said lightly.
General Drado scoffed. "Wishful thinking."
"You know, now I wish it was overconfidence."

"You live as long as I have, Jedi Rhysode, you learn expect the unexpected," the aged general chuckled.
"General! Outer-system hypercom buoys just picked up a series of micro-jumps."
General Drado gripped the top of his cane and stared out into the space before them. "So it begins."
At once, the space distorted and Yuuzhan Vong ships began to drop out of hyperspace in a staggered formation. The Palanhi navy immediately filled the area with missiles and lasers, blowing apart Yuuzhan Vong ships before their captains even realized what was happening. It was a massacre, with frigate to cruiser sized vessels being ripped to shreds from the unexpected barrage.
Several larger Yuuzhan Vong vessels arrived and began soaking up the damage. This allowed the few surviving ships to launch coralskippers. Sporadic return fire from their plasma cannons scored the first casualties on the Palanhi side; downing a privately owned frigate and its gunboat escort.
Yet, an incessant battery of missiles and laser continued to ravage the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Coralskippers were vaporized, organic battleships chipped apart until a burnt out coral frame was all that was left.
"Several Yuuzhan Vong ships have managed to get outside the kill zone," the helm officer reported, even as a fiery explosion erupted from one of the bigger Vong capital ships.
"That's nothing to worry about," General Drado dismissed, reading the sensor reports. "Continue to hold position and fire on any more emerging enemy forces."
"This is almost too easy," Ganner murmured. It was hard to feel sorry for a race that had already slaughtered trillions of people, but the warriors aboard the ships being annihilated never had a chance. A sense of uneasiness filled Ganner's stomach. He was missing something.
"What does your Jedi intuition tell you, Rhysode?" Drado said wisely.
"I don't know…it's just…"
"Sir! A second enemy battle group has jumped in from a different approach vector. Their course suggests that they are trying to flank our left wing."
"Sensors show that our left wing is outnumbered three to one," another bridge officer called out. "Captain Trasle is pulling his ships back."
"That," Ganner groaned.
The view aboard the *Indigo* changed as the flagship of the Palanhi navy swung around to face the new threat. A Yuuzhan Vong fleet of a little over a dozen ships in a four-point arrowhead-shaped formation was

leading a forward charge towards the Palanhi left wing. The ships that had been stationed there were being ripped apart by the onslaught to their flank. Like an arrow, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet continued to approach, forcing the Palanhi line back in on itself.
"That must have been what the hypercom buoys had detected," Ganner said grimly. "Part of the fleet arrived just outside of the system, saw the situation, and jumped out to gain a better approach vector."
"No sense worrying about that now," General Drado replied grimly. "Have Captain Trasle fold his ships into our formation. If we can hold them, we'll have Captain Relan fold the right wing around the enemy fleet like a hinge. Get me Rogue Squadron."
"Colonel Darklighter is listening."
"Colonel, we're going to need you and your people to act as the pivot point for our next little trap. The Vong who escaped the death trap will try to break through at your location, so you will have to hold them for as long as you can."
"Orders received General Drado. And don't worry, impossible is our specialty."
"Who said I was worried," General Drado snorted. He then addressed the other bridge crew. "Launch fighters and fire as soon as we have solutions. They may outnumber us now, but we can still give them something to remember."
"This is more of what I expected," Ganner muttered in a low voice.
General Drado raised a white eyebrow. "So did I, Jedi Rhysode."
"Great minds think alike?"
"Either that, or we're just too pessimistic for our own good."
(0) *(0)*
Borleias, Pyria System
Kyp couldn't quite believe his eyes. When the Wraith Voort 'Piggy' saBinring had knocked on his door with word that Jaina had needed him on the roof of the biotics facility, Kyp had envisioned all sorts of scenarios.
She had been lately running high on the news that Anakin was somehow alive. When their Force-bond was connected during their patrols, her happiness and joy made Kyp feel like a voyeur. Feeling Jaina's emotions, outside of the steady, methodological mind-set she had when they normally flew their missions, was not something Kyp was used to. Sure, at one point in time they may have been master and apprentice. They might have also had something more. But that was the past. It was one of the reasons why he immediately shut her out after they returned to the hangar. The mission was over. There was no need to prolong their bond; to sense her feelings and intimate

thoughts when he had no business sensing them. Such was the pitfall of being a Jedi Master strong in the Force. Constant mental contact with someone like Jaina on a daily basis for the past month and a half… it was hard not to ignore the old feelings she was stirring up.
Each time they linked up, he was reminded of her out-going nature and inner strength. The ability to get the job done using either brawns or brains. Not to mention her ability to hold her own in a battle of wits. She was the perfect balance between her two brothers, capable of seeing both light and dark. Passionate. Trusting. Willing to put herself in the line of fire so another wouldn't have to.
Kyp exhaled to clear his mind. He once again tried to imagine why Jaina would need him before the evening meal, on the roof of all places.
Needless to say, the sight before him hadn't been included in any of the scenarios he had been envisioning.
The sky above was already an inky dark, but a soft glow on the horizon attested to how recently the sun had set. Situated amidst various equipment housings and antennas, were several blankets, laid out across the uneven surface of the roof. Silhouettes, big and small, were laid over said blankets, in a scene that had Kyp scratching his head.
"You're having a picnic?" Kyp snorted.
"That's right," Jaina motioned to the others around her. In the faint light, Kyp could recognize them as the other members of his squadron "And the Goddess has commanded all members of Twin Suns squadron to attend. Including you."
"You're getting strange, Goddess." Kyp quirked an eyebrow but hopped over a nearby housing unit and sat cross-legged across from the stiff form of Jag.
"It's not just a picnic." Jaina took a bottle from one of the coolers and poured some of its contents into a glass. She handed the glass to Kyp. "It's a celebration of sorts. A reminder that we're all alive. A chance to give thanks to the others in this squad for keeping us that way."
"And a chance to remind Zindra that she's no Anakin Solo," Twin Suns Twelve, formerly Kyp's Dozen Twelve, Ryza Tyreed, joked. Being one of the first to join his squadron, not to mention one of the few to survive, Kyp had always had a strong Force-bond with her. "Since Zindra's injuries have rendered her unable to process alcohol for the time being, I'll have her glass."
The object of the joke, her arm still in a sling and the bacta patch over where her liver was being regrown, made a face. "That's okay, I'm developing a taste for blue milk."

Kyp chuckled softly and downed the contents of the cup Jaina had given him. He also made a face, but for a different reason. "What was that! Paint thinner?" He rasped, feeling his throat burn.
Jaina, who had just downed her cupful, did her best to keep her face impassive. From the hoarse coughing and cursing from the rest of the squadron, however, she and Jag were the only ones who were seemingly unaffected by the potent liquor.
Through the Force, however, Kyp could feel the fireworks going off in the nerves of Jaina's throat, and he shook his head. "If you wanted to remind us all that we were alive, mission accomplished, Goddess."
"That's the last time I'm trusting the age-old practices of Borleias' distillers." Jaina croaked, her voice similar to that of an old lady.
"If you don't mind me asking, Goddess. Why the change of heart?" Kyp said. He had seen Jaina withdraw into herself, knew that getting to know others, getting close to them, was one of the last things she wanted to do.
Jaina raised an eyebrow at him. "As Jag was so kind to remind me."
"Meaning he waved his hands in your face," Kyp said dryly. "Direct confrontation is more the Fel family style."
"Whatever works," Jag said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Besides, that's only from one side of my family. Sneakiness is another inherited trait."
"Can I continue?"
"Sorry, Goddess."
"Anyway, Jag reminded me that unit efficiency and longevity is increased when those in the unit have something more than just a duty as a reason to watch each other's backs. We have to be more than just partners, wingmen, or shield-trio. We're all part of Twin Suns, an entire squadron of *twelve* people who look out for each other. Not just when we're in the air, but on the ground and outside of combat as well. Until we're dead, we're going to be covering each other's backs, as a squadron, as friends. As your Goddess, the notion of making friends has been as alien to me as the Vong. I've been keeping myself distant from the rest of you, using the need to act like Vong goddess as an excuse. But in truth, the last thing I want is to lose people who are important to me. I figured that if I didn't know you, your deaths wouldn't hurt when the time came. So I would first like to apologize to the rest of the squadron. All of you risk your lives, more so than usual because you fly with me. You could have easily requested transfers to the Razors or Green squadron, but you guys have all stuck with me, so thank you."

Kyp inclined his head politely with the rest, but his mind had returned to what Jag had said just before Jaina's speech. Something about having inherited sneakiness too.
Though Jaina continued to address the rest of the squadron, her gaze was locked squarely on him for the next part of her speech. "We are a team, a family. Both in the air and on the ground. We will work together and if it should happen, die together. Your wingmen are your partners. You make sure they stay alive, and they'll return the favor. You do not go off and die alone. As your Goddess, and as someone who wants you to keep on living, this is a command and a very serious request. So, with that sappiness out of the way. Let's toast, to partners, to family, and to our friends."
Everyone raised their glasses, then, glancing fearfully at the contents, looked to each other for support before downing their drinks.
In between more coughing, and the light conversation that broke out, Jaina moved over to Kyp and held out her hand. "Partners, Kyp?"
"What about Jag?"
"Kyp, there's partners, there's boyfriend-girlfriend, and there's master-apprentice. You don't qualify for the other two."
"There's no other option?"
"There is one, but you won't like it. Unless you're truly into that sort of thing, of course." Jaina pinned him with an uncomfortable glare. "You can go off and die alone. I meant what I said, this is a squadron, with people looking out for each other. Not every man for themselves. I'm going to get this squadron through this war and I would definitely like your help in doing this. But if you want to go off and do your own thing…"
Kyp sighed. "I see you inherited your father's considerable powers of negotiation."
Jaina ignored his jibe and continued to hold out her hand. "That's right. So?"
Kyp turned his gaze towards the now darkened horizon, then nodded once and shook her hand. "Partners it is."
"Good, now because you took so long to decide, drink to it." She refilled their cups, and motioned for Jag to come over. "You too, since this whole thing was your idea."
Kyp looked at his full cup with apprehension. "Do we have to?"
Jaina grinned. "We have to."
Jag raised his glass and chuckled. "It's a drink that makes death-duels with Vong pilots pale in comparison."
"Here, here!" Echoed several of the other pilots.
"To the Twin Suns," Jaina held up her glass.

The rest of the squadron echoed her toast. "To the Twin Suns!"
(0) *(0)*
Coruscant
The New Republic infiltration group took extra care of their injured team members as they loaded them up into a cargo ship that had been located by the members of Wraith Squadron. Though the Jedi members of the team were still worried about the Force-sensitive Yuuzhan Vong that had fought Tahiri, they could do little about it. The number of coralskippers flying over the area suggested that their brawl with both the Vong forces and Lord Nyax hadn't gone unnoticed. Added to that was the fact that both Kyle and Tahiri needed a fully equipped medical center, preferably one that wasn't bombed out or located on a Vong controlled planet.
With the initial objectives of their mission to Coruscant complete—the seeding of Freed Ones among the Vong population and the setting up of resistance cells among the survivors—the New Republic team had no desire to press their luck any further. Even with Tarc missing, they just couldn't afford to search for him given their injuries and the added Vong presence.
"All systems are a go," Kell called out over the ship-wide comm, flipping the switches that would start the engines. "Ladies and gentlemen, please make sure your seatbelts are fastened. In the event you don't have any seatbelts, please lodge a complaint with the designer of this vessel. They will be more than happy to handle any medical expenses that arise."
"Is it smart to let a guy who specializes in blowing things up pilot this ship?" Danni said in mock whisper.
"It's why he's the *co*-pilot," Jan said, taking the ship out from its docking berth. "How are our patients?"
Danni glanced back over her shoulder. "Your guess is as good as mine. As far as I know, they're in healing trances."
"Aren't you a Jedi too?"
"Quasi-Jedi," Danni replied. "I have the potential, but just barely. I'd probably have more success lifting rocks with my hands than my mind. I can go check on them if you want."
"No, it's okay. I'm sure Jaden and Mara will give a shout if there's anything wrong."
The ship finished pulling away from the docking bay. As it did, the occupants in the cockpit saw a single figure standing on the roof of the building opposite of them.
"What the…?" Jan leaned forward in an attempt to see the figure better.

"One of Coruscant's survivors?" Kell guessed, also frowning.
Danni, however, felt a chill run down her spine. "No, it isn't."
"I thought you said your Jedi powers were no good?"
"There's a difference between trying to feel the world around you and having your hand pressed directly against what you are trying to feel." Danni whispered. "That's the Vong-Jedi Tahiri faced."
The single figure watched passively as Jan and Kell maneuvered the ship into the open.
"What do you think she's doing?" Kell murmured. "Giving us a sendoff?"
"Probably. I think…if she wanted to, she could keep us from leaving," Danni said, hugging herself.
Jan watched the figure with great apprehension as she began to angle the ship upwards. "She wants us to leave, doesn't she?"
Danni swallowed, eyes glued to the figure. "Yes."
Both Mara and Jaden filled the cockpit, having sensed the disturbance in the Force.
"Vongerella?" Jaden said, looking over Jan's shoulder.
"If Vongerella's your name for that Force-sensitive Vong, then yes." Jan said grimly, the ship somehow remaining level to the roof of the adjacent building despite Jan and Kell's attempts to ascend.
"It's what Tahiri called her before she went into her healing trance." Mara said.
The Vong-Jedi waved a single hand in parting, a very human-like gesture, before shimming away; as if she had only been a mirage. The ship suddenly lurched skyward once more, and resumed its outbound flight.
"Something tells me that's not the last time we'll see her," Jaden muttered, gripping the back of the pilot's chair.
"That same something tells me we won't enjoy it when we do meet again," Mara agreed. "But we can't do anything about it now."
"You're right," Jaden rubbed at his face tiredly.
"How's Kyle?" Jan asked.
"And Aunt Tahiri," Kell added.
"Both will live." Mara said. "They're in healing trances at the moment, with Face and Elassar watching over them."
Jan relaxed back into her chair. "That's good. You might as well get some rest yourselves. I can get us back to Borleias, but it's still going to be a while."
"Any problems with the Vong fleet in orbit?"
"Please, remember who you're talking to," Jan said, setting the engines to full throttle. The occupants were thrown back as the ship lurched

past surprised Vong coralskippers. "We'll be back on Borleias in time for dinner."
(0) *(0)*
"Where are we going?" A frightened Tarc whispered as he was herded onto a large Yuuzhan Vong ship.
His protector, the Shamed One who had saved him, glanced around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard, before replying. "We and several others have been assigned to attend to Denua Ku and his warriors on their trip to Ylesia."
Tarc digested the information, then shrugged. "I guess I'm getting off this planet after all."
"Try to remain like…like a shadow," the Shamed One whispered in warning. "Denua Ku has a harsh reputation for executing slaves for the smallest of offenses."
"Right, it's not like avoiding angry Vong hasn't always been my highest priority anyways," Tarc muttered sarcastically.
The two fell silent as several warriors boarded the ship and walked past them.
"So…what will we be doing?" Tarc said, eyes darting back towards the 'mouth' of the ship as more slaves were directed on.
"*You* will be doing the serving. I will most likely be tasked to the dovin basal because of my past experiences with them. Your exact task depends on the temperament of the warriors." The Shamed One said.
There was a loud argument at the entrance of the ship. Several warriors apparently didn't appreciate the orders they were being given. A larger, more vocal warrior, immediately spun around and jammed his amphistaff through one of the slaves being led onto the ship. Tarc reflexively winced and tried to hide behind the Shamed One looking out for him.
"That guy's the boss, isn't he?"
"Denua Ku," the Shamed One nodded.
"So if he's that angry…" Tarc trailed off, gulping as the warrior stormed aboard.
"Then do nothing and stay out of his sight," his protector murmured. "You will have a better chance of surviving until we reach our destination if you do."
"What got him so mad?" Tarc whispered, hearing the warrior bark orders to his subordinates.
His protector cocked her head for a moment to listen, then frowned. "Apparently the Supreme Overlord has told him that he is to take orders from a human."
"That's a bad thing?"

"Possibly the greatest insult a warrior can be given."
"So who's the human that gets to boss this Vong around?"
The Shamed One listened some more. "A former senator of your people. They do not mention her by name."
Tarc's gaze, however, was frozen back towards the landing ramp. Mechanically, he answered his own question. "They don't have to. I know who she is. She's Viqi Shesh."
The two quieted as the former senator began to command her escort. "Yes, if I am to be seen as a leader, Denua Ku will have to relinquish his quarters to me. I do not care where he sleeps, but he has been ordered to follow my commands. If he refuses to obey shall I take this issue up with the Supreme Overlord?"
"That is not necessary," a warrior replied silkily, though with obvious distaste.
"That's Maal Lah," Tarc's Shamed One murmured. "He's even worse than Denua Ku when it comes to the life of anyone not Yuuzhan Vong."
But Tarc's gaze was still on the woman who had ruined his life. Who had messed up his face and got his mother and sister killed. He couldn't believe that she would be on the same ship.
As she entered the ship, he quickly looked away. He needn't have bothered. She had passed the Shamed Ones and slaves without a second glance, like they weren't anything more than dirt. More yelling ensued deeper in the ship, but it was obvious that Viqi had gotten her way once more.
Tarc's hands curled into fists as he stared at the woman's retreating form. She had destroyed everything he had held dear. If he ever got the chance…he emitted a low growl and tore his gaze away. He couldn't do anything at the moment, being a slave under the watchful eye of a Vong warrior. But maybe, just maybe, he could find a way and get even.
(0) Chapter End *(0)*
A\N: Last chapter of Rebel Stand will be up next week. Please review if you so desire.

ADA 19

Nineteen
(0) *(0)*
Borleias, Pyria System
Jaina couldn't help but smile as Tahiri was brought out of the bacta tank by the medical droid. The team from Coruscant had arrived yesterday, shortly after the return of both Ganner and Rogue

Squadron. Jaina had been there to welcome them back, and hadn't at all been reassured by the news of Tahiri's status. Now, though, seeing the blond emerge from the bacta tank as good as new, any of the pressure she had been feeling had evaporated.
Jaina held up a robe for the younger Jedi, shaking her head in relief. "That's the last time I want to hear 'Tahiri was stabbed by a lightsaber,' got that?"
"I'll do my best," Tahiri slipped her hands through the sleeves and loosely cinched the robe together as she made her way across the med-bay. "Wasn't all that fun anyways. Advice for the future? Don't get stabbed by one, they hurt. Even by Yuuzhan Vong standards."
Jaina rolled her eyes. "I'll keep that in mind. Jeez, between you and Anakin…"
"You do know he's alive, right?" Tahiri said, looking sharply to the older Jedi while reaching for a shirt that had been folded up on a chair for her. She ducked behind a small screen to change.
"Jacen and I felt that, whatever it was he did, a couple days back," Jaina confirmed, having already discussed the topic with her elated parents and aunt.
Han and Leia had landed on Borleias earlier in the morning after encountering some wild adventures of their own; once again reminding Jaina that encountering exciting and dangerous situations ran in the family. Going off of Jag's advice, Jaina simply took the time to enjoy being in the company of her parents. Even if they died during the Vong assault-to-come, she would at least have one last happy memory to live off of. As Jag had told her, live with no regrets.
"So Mara and I didn't imagine it." Tahiri's bright smile returned, her head popping back out of the head-hole of her shirt as she looked over the screen. "As his big sister, you got first shot at that nerf-brain."
"You're not worried about him?"
"'Course I am," Tahiri replied with a careless shrug. "But as long as he's alive, I'll be okay."
"The two of you are completely out of your minds, you know that right?"
"And what about you and Colonel Tall-Dark-and-Clawcrafty? Don't think I didn't see the two of you kiss when I was in the bacta tank."
"'Clawcrafty'?" Jaina tried to change the subject as she felt some heat return to her cheeks.
"Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Shirtless is reserved for Zekk," Tahiri continued brightly, bare feet padding along the floor. They left the med-bay at a casual gait, in no rush to reach their next destination. "And if I'm

reading you right, Anakin will definitely be disappointed that his 'childhood friends' theory didn't work out."
Jaina wondered how anyone could be so happy after being stabbed and bacta-dipped. "How did this conversation become about me and what I might or might not have with Jag?"
"You're fun to talk about?" Tahiri grinned, looking up at her.
"Right," Jaina took that moment to bring the younger teen into a hug. "I'm glad you made it back, Tahiri."
Tahiri's surprise was clear through the Force, but the younger teen quickly relaxed and returned the hug. "Course," Tahiri murmured, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "It's great to be home."
"Yes, it is." Jaina stepped back.
Tahiri glanced up at her shyly. "Umm… on that note. Do you have another copy of those holovids you gave me before I went to Coruscant? I…I kind of destroyed them when I thought that Anakin was…well, you know."
"Sure," Jaina halted her hand before it mussed Tahiri's hair, and very carefully lowered it to the blond girl's shoulder. "There's a copy of the family vids stored aboard the *Falcon*. Maybe mom and dad can even give you a director's commentary while you watch them."
"Thanks," Tahiri said perkily.
Jaina draped an around the younger teen's shoulders and they headed towards the mess-hall. "You know, I've been meaning to ask. How *did* you manage to get a lightsaber wound on a planet full of Vong? Jaden would only say something about a Vongerella."
Tahiri made a sound of exasperation and shook her head. "Really? With all the effort the Freed Ones are putting in to learn Basic, you would think there would be just as much effort to learn the Yuuzhan Vong language."
"So it wasn't a Vongerella?"
"Jaden's mixing up a Yuuzhan Vong title for a name. There's 'erella' which is a very old shaper term for 'student' or 'apprentice,' and there's of course 'vong'. When put together, they kind of have an archaic meaning of 'initiate.' 'Child learner' could be another translation I guess."
Jaina could feel the young blond put up all sorts of mental and emotional barriers, so she glanced questioningly. "Tahiri?"
Tahiri offered Jaina a faint smile. "Sorry, I'm not trying to keep you out. It's just…I haven't really come to terms with what I saw yet. Maybe the old stories told by the Yuuzhan Vong are true."
"If you need someone to talk to…"
"I know," Tahiri said quickly. "Thanks."

Jaina rubbed Tahiri's arm. "No problem."
They entered the mess-hall, where practically everyone in the base was crowded around Ganner, Rogue Squadron, and several flat-screen holoprojectors.
Both female Jedi glanced at each other uncertainly.
"Oh, good, you're out of the tank!" Zindra called out with youthful exuberance, waving her hand at them. "Come on! You're just in time to see the premier of the Galactic Star's film on Ganner's exploits and the Battle for Palanhi."
Both female Jedi looked at each other again, unsure if they heard right.
"'Ganner's exploits?'"
"Come on!" Zindra pushed her way through the gathered crowd, grabbed both of their hands, and pulled them back through the center. The two teens sat on either side of an increasingly embarrassed looking Ganner.
"Ganner?" Jaina said questioningly.
"This is all Anakin's fault, you know," Ganner sighed in defeat as the opening title sequence played. He had to admit, the Galactic Star executives certainly knew how to make it dramatic. The events recorded during the battle were now being shown galaxy wide on multiple HoloNet channels; mostly due to the fact that the Galactic Star had shared the footage of the battle with the other stations at no charge. If Jedi could be recruited, Ganner thought dryly, this would be one heck of a recruitment video. "'It'll only be a few interviews,' he said. 'Just be your charming self,' he said. 'It's not like they'll be showing a movie of your life.'"
"Shhh!" Tahiri hissed. "The movie's starting."
Ganner threw up his hands in exasperation, but returned his attention to the screens. With a field of stars for a backdrop, a recap of the Yuuzhan Vong war, in golden-yellow font scrolled across the screen to a rousing score. A paragraph speaking to the state of the Palanhi government before Ganner's arrival finished up the intro. Then, a holocam panned upwards to reveal the bottom of a passing ship.
"That's General Drado's flag, the *Indigo*," Ganner murmured.
Shortly after, a much larger Peace Brigade vessel passed over the *Indigo* pulling the ship into its docking bay, and recreating the meeting between the Palanhi military leaders and the Peace Brigade. The scene was spliced together with actual security footage from the ships themselves and re-enactments.
When Ganner's X-wing was later shown touching down at one of the landing pads on Palanhi, the gathered crowd cheered at his arrival. More re-enactments of Ganner's meeting with the president's

daughter, then a replay of the final interview that decided the fate of Palanhi. Ganner, trying to remain modest, shifted uncomfortably as several people clapped his back or complimented his choice of words. Even more embarrassing was the realization that Pal'iva had actually been recording his stand in front of the starport during the invasion by the Vong forces.
"Wow, look at you being a hero," Jaina said with a teasing laugh as the Ganner on-screen drew a line in the ground.
"I was only pretending to be one! It's not my fault the Yuuzhan Vong took me seriously," Ganner said with mock defensiveness. "You and the rest of your family make better heroes anyways. I'm perfectly happy as a sidekick."
"Don't those tend to die in the holovids?" Tahiri whispered, though her eyes were glued to the screen as Ganner proceeded to handle the charge of hundreds of Yuuzhan Vong warriors.
"As long as I get to die heroically," Ganner chuckled. The view of the scene shifted as Pal'iva turned her initial holocam-bot into a club and incited the thousands hiding out in the starport to join the battle.
The other battles were shown in dramatic fashion, including the Yuuzhan Vong counterattack and some extremely brave and daring maneuvers by Rogue Squadron.
"I didn't know an X-wing could do that," Jaina whistled, wide-eyed as the camera tracked Gavin's sudden one-eighty turn.
"Played havoc with the engines and inertial dampeners," Gavin said. "Also partially ripped off my canopy. Glad I had my flight-suit."
"Jaina, are *all* X-wing pilots crazy?" Tahiri said in disbelief.
That brought a round of chuckles from the pilots in the crowd around them.
"Some crazier than most, Tahiri." Jaina grinned. "You and Anakin would definitely fit right in."
The space battle concluded in a vivid fashion, with the Yuuzhan Vong commander attempting to ram his stricken vessel into the *Indigo*. Gouts of flame and coral flew off the command ship as it was pounded from all sides. Several other Yuuzhan Vong vessels attempted to assist their leader in his endeavor, but they too were steadily blown away. A camera zoomed onto Ganner's face, his eyes closed in concentration. He may not have been able to manipulate the Vong vessel, but he could still help push the *Indigo* off of the approaching absence in the Force. The Vong vessel narrowly missed, and it was promptly pummeled to pieces. A fireball engulfed it, officially ending the Battle for Palanhi.

The last chapter of the movie was an award scene. The citizens of Palanhi and its military forces lined the sides of the presidential palace as Ganner, Gavin, and the captain of the New Republic frigate *Serpentine,* Fayykarya, walked down the middle of the aisle the others had created.
"The Hero's Star is the highest award the people of Palanhi can grant you," Doria Anshal, the president's daughter, presented several medals. *"Palanhi remains free of the tyranny of the Yuuzhan Vong and their allies because of your help. Thank you, and may the people of Palanhi forever remain allies with the New Republic."*
Wearing the medals around their necks,the three New Republic representatives turned towards the crowd, and applause broke out.
"Wow," Jaina said, looking at Ganner in a new light.
Ganner sheepishly scratched the back of his head. "Pal'iva has a flare for the dramatic. She made me look a whole lot better than I thought I had."
"Look on the bright side," Corran was shaking his head in amusement. "You finally got what you wanted. They'll be making holovids out of this for years to come."
Ganner groaned theatrically while the credits scrolled in the background. "Now that I've finally found fame, I discover it isn't what I thought it would be."
"Right, you can be the first Jedi holo-vid actor," Tahiri motioned to the members of Wraith Squadron. "I'm sure Face can give you some pointers."
"Nope," Ganner said, shaking his head vigorously. "I'm out of the movie business. Too much work."
"Your career was bright and it burned out fast," Face chuckled. "You wouldn't be the first actor that's happened to."
"Atten-shun!" A voice called out from the back of the room.
General Wedge Antilles, Colonel Tycho Celchu, and Luke Skywalker entered the room, and a serious atomosphere immediately descended.
Soon, the tables were filled with divisional heads, squadron commanders, ship captains, spies, and Jedi, while the others filtered out of the room.
Those left sobered as they began to listen to the briefing that would decide their fates for the coming battle.
(0) *(0)*
From the cockpit of her X-wing, Jaina heard her uncle's voice over the comm-system. *"Blackmoon Leader to Control, Blackmoon squadron is in readiness."*
Other voices soon came in. *"Wild Knights are a go."*

"Rogue squadron, standing by."
"*Taanab Yellow Aces, as ready as we can be."*
"Vanguard squadron awaiting launch."
Jaina flipped the comm switch. "Twin Suns Leader, here. Twin Suns is ready to kick Vong butt."
"All squadrons, this is Control. You have a green light for launch."
Jaina acknowledged with a click, waiting for the awkward looking fighters of the Starlancer project to take flight. Through the Force she could feel Jacen providing an anchor for the Jedi meld, silently helping to orchestrate the decisive battle for Borleias. His presence was a comfort to her, a reminder that despite the war's harshness, she still had her brothers fighting with her in one way or another. As she linked up with the meld, the senses of the other Jedi flooded her mind; enhancing her situational awareness. Kyp, Saba Sebatyne, her uncle and aunt, Corran, and all the others were there, their vast experiences all coming together to augment the abilities of all the Jedi in the meld. One after another, the elite squadrons stationed at the Borleias biotics facility followed her squadron up and into orbit. The clustering of elite squadrons only served to reinforce the importance of the biotics facility and the Starlancer fighters. Or at least that's what it would look like to any spies watching the launch and now communicating panicked messages back to their superiors.
The *Millennium Falcon* followed Captain Sair Yonka's *Freedom* two kilometers away, assisting the squadrons out of the *Lusankya* with the coralskippers and capital ships moving in on the biotics facility. Other fighters under the command of General Antilles rose, along with blastboats and the *Corona*-class frigate, the *Serpentine.*
In some ways, it was the deadliest armada ever launched. In others, it was also the most risky bait ever used. The elite squadrons were creating an artificial importance to the biotics facility and pipefighters. But at the same time, that artificial importance would draw in the best the Yuuzhan Vong had to offer. The pilots would need to rely on their skill and experience if they wanted to survive the monster they attracted.
An order was sent from General Antilles to Commander Davip aboard the *Lusankya*. If things went their way, the greatest threat in the Yuuzhan Vong fleet would soon be neutralized.
(0) *(0)*
Zindra Daine was not important like Jaina Solo or Eldo Davip. She did not have the luxury of a Super Star Destroyer's shields or multiple decoy missiles designed to mimic her fighter's gravimetric signature. In fact, like most of the other pilots participating in the battle, she was

just lucky to be alive. While Jaina, Sharr, Piggy, Kyp, and Jag continued to carry out their bag of tricks to enhance Jaina's reputation as Yun-Harla, and Eldo Davip continued to wave the *Lusankya* in front of the Vong like a giant slab of meat, she was with the rest of the squadrons; staring down over two-hundred approaching coralskippers.
"Confirmed count, two hundred and ten coralskippers. One hundred and thirty blastboulders." Danni's report came over the comm. *"A couple of those gravimetric anomalies in their wake. Time to intercept, three minutes."*
Zindra exhaled, extremely grateful that they wouldn't be engaging such an overwhelming force…yet.
Luke Skywalker's voice was quick to follow Danni's report. *"All squadrons, all squadrons, reverse course. Head back and initiate Stage Two on a one-minute countdown.....Beginning countdown....now."*
Zindra promptly sent her fighter in a harsh turn, pulling away from the approaching wave of enemy fighters as she prepared for a micro-jump out of the area. She would have been happy not engaging the wave of fighters at all, but she could handle the brief delay. Just another few minutes of staying alive without the constant threat of being turned into a burning fireball.
(0) *(0)*
Captain Sair Yonka of the *Freedom* was used to challenging odds. So when two Yuuzhan Vong cruiser analogs approached his ship from opposite angles, while a third tried to cut him off, he wasn't worried at all. The *Freedom* had received a few upgrades since coming to Borleias. Big, shiny guns that had once belonged to the *Lusankya.* Though the prow of his ship looked a little cluttered, covered in shapely boxes designed to hide newly installed weapons, it would deal one heck of a surprise to the Vong approaching him.
"Keep our current course," Yonka dictated calmly. The Yuuzhan Vong vessels continued to close in, holding their fire. He scowled at the vessels outside the viewport. They no doubt were waiting until their weapons were in their maximum effective range. "Fire batteries four through nine; let the Vong think we're a lame duck."
The *Freedom*'s original laser batteries opened fire in a display so pitiful that the Emperor would have hung his head in shame. Sair winced slightly and sent a mental apology to the designer of the ship for such a gross misuse of its true capabilities.
"Sir, the ship in front of us is moving into position to broadside us."
The *Freedom* shook as the three Vong ships began to pace their fire, still waiting until they were at an optimal distance to go all out.
"Shields holding."

"Maximum effective range will be reached in three…two…one…"
Sair clenched a fist in front of him with a vicious grin. "Open fire, all batteries."
The captains of the three Mataloks never knew what had hit them. In one moment, their prey appeared to have been successfully trapped between them. In the next, sheets of green and red were tearing through their ships. The protective coverings over the hidden laser batteries were ejected with explosive bolts, and the batteries let loose into the unprepared ships. Over sixty turbolaser batteries, thirty-three on each side of the *Freedom*, pounded the two Mataloks closing in from opposite angles; instantly turning the ships into superheated, explosive ruins. The third Matalok at the forefront of the *Freedom* was treated to a barrage of missiles at point-blank range. The *Freedom* effortlessly steered through the hole in the middle of the Matalok, then jumped to hyperspace.
(0) *(0)*
If I were the Yuuzhan Vong commander, I'd be very confused and frustrated by now, Zindra thought as she emerged into real-space by the *Lusankya. Otherwise, why else would I be sending all these kriffin' coralskippers here?*
The two-hundred plus fighters Danni had picked up earlier had finished their massacre of the pipefighters and were now making a bee-line for the largest ship in their fleet. A ship with a crew of one. A ship that had been completely stripped down so that only its shields and engines were fully powered. A ship that most of Twin Suns squadron just happened to be in charge of protecting until she could finish her mission.
"Alright, Five, Six you're with me," Zindra said to the other members of her shield trio. The organization of Twin Suns had been completely changed up for the battle. With the addition of the Wraiths and Beelyath to assist Jaina in her Yun-Harla act, call-signs had been completely reworked. Which meant that she, Zindra Daine, was now in charge of the middle two shield-trios of Twin Suns; at least until Kyp and Jaina re-entered the battle. "Seven, Eight, and Ten, follow us in. When those skip's hit us, we're going destroy them. Failing that, we'll make 'em leave depleted and tattered, got that?"
The other pilots responded in affirmative. But as the line of blastboulders and coralskippers continued to get closer, Zindra began to doubt her own confidence. Hopefully it wouldn't be the Twin Suns who were the ones who would soon be tattered, depleted, and destroyed.
The two sides met in a deafening exchange of fire.

Most of the fire was directed towards the *Lusankya*, plasma flashing through the Super Star Destroyer's shields and ripping off large chunks of metal. But that soon changed as the Wild Knights, Vanguards, Blackmoons, and Rogues slammed through the line of coralskippers. Fighters were twisting and turning every which way.

Lasers flashing. Ships exploding in twos, threes.

Three X-wings from Blackmoon Squadron chased a couple of coralskippers into the *Lusankya*'shull.

An X-wing from Vanguard squadron was blasted in two by a plasma missile.

And then the battle fell upon Zindra's Twin Suns fighters.

Explosions crackled all around them. Fighters swooping above and below. Zindra quickly led her fellow squadmates into the thickest part of the battle without any hesitation. They were quite a sight, six X-wings swooping in, guns blazing. The maneuvering practices and time spent together ensured that the Twin Suns pilots were every bit as disciplined as their counterparts from the Rogue or Vanguard Squadrons.

Coralskippers ignited, becoming flaming hulks in the blink of an eye, even as they tried to arc away from the row of six fighters. A coralskipper pilot tried to drop in behind them, but a shield-trio from Vanguard Squadron vaped it in the cool efficient style of its Chiss squadron leader.

The Jedi-centric fighter squadrons, the Wild Knights and Blackmoons, were operating with eerie coordination that only Force-sensitives could achieve. Though they had also taken some casualties, they were inflicting a whole lot more in turn.

Even the Rogues and Taanab Yellow Aces were flying at their peak, pulling off maneuvers that were only possible with excess adrenaline and a fear for one's life.

Still, the number of enemy fighters far outnumbered that of the elite defenders. Gradually, those protecting the *Lusankya* began to decrease in number. Where the Yuuzhan Vong could afford the loss of an entire squadron without even blinking an eye, the defenders could scarcely afford to lose a single pilot. Wave after wave of coralskippers pounded them, taking with them valuable pilots, one and two at a time.

Relief came when the other half of Twin Suns Squadron put their plan into play; drawing away a large contingent of coralskippers with a 'Jaina missile,' a missile designed to mimic Jaina's starfighter's gravimetric profile. The added guns and skills of Kyp, Jaina, and Jag when they joined the battle, also helped.

Unfortunately the brief moment of respite was negated when both Blackmoon Squadron and Taanab Yellow Aces was pulled out to deal with an increase in the defenses of the Domain Hul worldship.
Zindra worried her lower lip as sweat poured down her face. Two squadrons down, with hundreds of coralskippers and blastboulders to go. Despite the odds, they had a mission to complete. She exhaled as she squeezed the trigger and vaped another skip. No tricks, no magic wand that could be waved to make everything go away. Just fighter-on-fighter combat with the hope that the higher-ups had known what they were doing when the planned the engagement out.
(0) *(0)*
The highest of the higher-ups had a very big problem. Wedge had fled the control room of the biotics facility only to find the shuttle that had been waiting for him a smoldering wreck. The ground continued to shake from an orbital bombardment, while coralskippers chipped away at the upper levels of the biotics facility. Landing ships were already in high orbit, using the bombardment as cover.
Pieces of durasteel and ferrocrete were raining down from the devastation being wrought upon the building he had just exited; lethal chunks landing all around him. If he didn't get clear soon, he'd soon be in a state similar to the pilot of his shuttle—dead.
Wedge sprinted away from the building's face. There was no purpose in going into the main docking bay, except perhaps to hide; it was open, and he could see from where he was that there was nothing more useful than a small cargo lifter left within it.
He had only just spotted the special operations docking bay when a plasma cannon projectile slammed through the roof of the building and caused its closed doors to blow outwards. Even if there had been a conveniently placed fighter or shuttle inside, it was no more.
Now even the useless cargo lifter seemed better than nothing.
"Warmaster Antilles."
Wedge spun around and came face to face with a Yuuzhan Vong. Near heart-attack notwithstanding, it took all of Wedge's considerable years of patience not to draw his blaster. From the lack of scars on the Vong's face, he could tell it was one of Tahiri and Anakin's Freed Ones.
"You didn't evacuate with the others?" Wedge asked, feeling his heart rate slow back to a regular frantic beating. He tried to recall the Freed One's name. He hadn't met with all of the Freed Ones, and he could by no means recognize them if they were together in a group. But several of the Freed Ones had stood out. The one before him was among those unique Yuuzhan Vong, with Kell Tainer's specific reference to his skills in hand-to-hand combat sharp in Wedge's mind.

The Freed One pointed to another burning wreck that had once been an assault transport. "An Uro-Ik V'alh shot the ship down."
"Survivors?"
"Fifteen other Freed Ones. Twelve of your men. The pilots and five others have returned to the gods."
The name came to Wedge. "Czalpak, right?"
The Freed One seemed surprised that Wedge knew his name. "I am honored that you remember."
"Right, honor later. A way off this planet, now."
Czalpak led Wedge to the other survivors. The humans immediately saluted, while the Freed Ones bowed their heads respectfully.
"Sir," a commando, with the rank of lieutenant, greeted Wedge.
"At ease. What do we have?"
"We were coming up with two plans, sir. We saw the *Ammund Swooper* get shot down just before us, so we could join them and get their ship running. However, that still leaves the ship that shot it down in the first place. Even if we do get the *Swooper* back in the air, it'll probably just get shot down again." Almost as if in emphasis to his statement, a massive explosion rolled out from the biotics facility, the sound dampened only by their distance from the building.
"And the alternative?"
The lieutenant motioned to the Freed Ones. "Czalpak and the other Freed Ones think that we can hijack one of the troop transports. We'll probably lose a few people, but at least those things have better shields and weapons than the *Swooper*. Then, the only risk we'll have is getting shot down by our own side."
"Why don't we do both?" Wedge said after a moment of thought. "One or two of us can get over to the *Swooper* and let them know of our plan. We can then use the troop transport to take out the fighters that shot down the *Swooper*, and the *Swooper* can use their comms to keep our side from shooting at our ship once we take it."
"I take it we should have the ones going to the *Swooper* be non-Yuuzhan Vong?" The lieutenant said, his usage of 'Yuuzhan' indicating that he had been part of the group of soldiers who had trained with the Freed Ones. Most anyone else would have simply referred to the alien invaders as 'Vong'.
"That would probably be a good idea." Wedge said.
The lieutenant made a motion, and two of his men took off through the jungle. Wedge joined the rest of the survivors and crept back over towards the biotics facility. The ground was pockmarked and littered with craters of all sizes. The top of the biotics facility was no longer in existence, and neither was the main hangar. Victims of the massive

explosion they had heard earlier. The orbital bombardment had ceased, and the Yuuzhan Vong landing ships were making their final pass before landing.
Apparently satisfied that there was no longer any incoming fire, three Yuuzhan Vong troop ships touched down. They were frigate analogs, not unlike the *Trickster*, though they were slightly smaller in size. The mouth-like ramps unfolded and hundreds of soldiers rushed out of each ship.
While the warriors moved to secure the area, Wedge, the Freed Ones, and the other New Republic soldiers, swiftly eliminated the sentries posted by the landing ramp of the nearest frigate. The bodies of the warriors were dragged into the ship, and one of the Freed Ones stroked a nodule that closed the ramp. The crew, though outnumbering Wedge's team by many, was ill-prepared for an attack inside the ship. With their warriors still outside, they didn't stand a chance.
One of the ship's crew was walking towards the ramp of the ship when he saw the boarding party. But before an alarm could be raised, he had a Yuuzhan Vong knife sticking out of his head. The Freed Ones and New Republic soldiers quickly rushed through the hallways, eliminating several more of the Vong crew with silent, lethal, precision.
Wedge witnessed firsthand just how deadly the Freed Ones and their New Republic counterparts had become. Several of the crew were taken down by a tag-team of Czalpak and the New Republic lieutenant. Czalpak ducked under one crewmember's weapon, then reached up and snapped the neck of the offender. At the same time, the New Republic lieutenant finished his own opponent off with a neck-chop that crushed the Vong's vocal chords. Czalpak swung back around and ended the life of the crewmember with a coufee to the heart. The bodies were once more dragged into nearby rooms.
Once on the bridge, the startled captain tried to rise from his seat, but he and several other officers were promptly gunned down by New Republic blasters. Several Freed Ones quickly took over the control stations, pulling on the cognition hoods and sealing off the rest of the ship.
"We are good to go, General," the lieutenant said with a well-deserved cocky grin.
Wedge, who hadn't really done anything at all during the taking of the ship, let out a relieved chuckle. It looked like he would be keeping his promise to Iella after all.
"The rest of the ship's crew?"
The lieutenant turned towards a Freed One monitoring a villip cluster and repeated the question. The Freed One stroked several villips, then

replied. "There are still over a hundred onboard. Most were in their quarters when we sealed the ship. Others, however, are tending to the ship's weapons or dovin basal."
"Can we do anything about them?"
"The only thing we can do is go through each area one by one and take them out that way." The Freed One said.
"We better deal with them now, rather than wait for them to cause trouble." Wedge nodded his consent. "In the meantime, take off and head back towards the *Ammund Swooper*. I'll use my comlink to establish communications with them."
As the ship rose, Wedge noticed an odd expression on Czalpak's face. "What's wrong?"
Czalpak blinked, then attempted to return to his usual stoic self as he replied. "In the old times, before we were free, death was given to any Shamed who dare touch the ship's cognition hood. It is…strange, to see those who were once Shamed piloting a ship of the Yun'o."
Wedge took a moment to glance at the Freed Ones controlling the ship. "Wait a minute. Are you saying that they've never piloted a ship before?"
Czalpak looked at Wedge as if he was slow. "They have not. But do not concern yourself, Warmaster Antilles. I believe your people have a saying: There is a first time for everything?"
(0) *(0)*
Iella had been watching the traffic to and from Borleias from her position in the bridge of the *Mon Mothma*. Her transport had docked with the Interdictor the moment it had dropped out of hyperspace, and she had rushed to her station to do the job set out for her. Though her main task was to help coordinate the starfighters to ensure the success of Operation Emperor's Spear, she continued to check Borleias for one last New Republic vessel.
"The biotics facility just received a direct hit." Iella's sharp ears picked up the sensor operator's report. "Landing craft have entered the atmosphere."
"Any sign of General Antilles's shuttle?" Colonel Celchu asked the operator, his eyes briefly meeting hers.
"No sir. The only vessels coming or going now are Vong. Borleias is behind enemy lines."
Iella gripped the communication's console in front of her to keep herself standing, a small surge of panic rising in her. She wouldn't count Wedge out just yet. Not until there was actual confirmation of his death. She had lost count of the times people had assumed he was dead, only to having him miraculously pop up alive and healthy.

As an intelligence analyst, she knew full well the cost of war. How it took people away when you least expected it. But at the same time, the part of her heart that belonged to Wedge still refused to admit the possibility that he could be sprawled out dead on the cold floor of the biotics facility.
To distract herself from her racing heart, she focused on coordinating the fighter squadrons. At the very least, even if Wedge was dead, she could ensure that his plan took as many Vong down as possible.
Tycho appeared to be of a similar mind and began to give orders to keep the *Mon Mothma*'s gravity-well projectors in range of the worldship. The two exchanged a single glance, a silent show of support for the other. In the background, a whole host of voices continued to report on the unfolding battle.
"Yammosk jamming has been activated, Yuuzhan Vong forces losing their coordination."
"Several groups of Vong ships are still acting in concert. Analysis of their movements suggests that the jamming is still effective, but that these ships trained for it."
"Operation Emperor's Spear still on course. The *Lusankya* fighter-cover reporting double-digit loses."
"Jacen Solo is advising that we re-allocate Blackmoon squadron to cover the gap left by the loss Shockwave squadron."
"The Yuuzhan Vong worldship has reversed course, but they still won't be able to avoid the *Lusankya*."
"The New Republic frigate *Gilded Cage* has gone dark, moving the *Serpentine* and *Judicator* to compensate."
"Analyzing Yuuzhan Vong fleet movements, it appears that they're trying to flank our position and force more units away from the *Lusankya*."
"Colonel," one of the techs in the bridge pit called out.
"What is it?"
"Sir, I've been scanning Borleias for any sign of General Antilles, and I'm seeing something…weird."
"Define 'weird,' corporal." Tycho snapped.
"Yes sir. If I'm reading this right, a Vong frigate and a Corellian freighter tagged the *Ammund Swooper* are attempting to blast through several Vong corvette analogs and their coralskipper escort."
The corporal had the full attention of Tycho and Iella. Tycho frowned.
"Wait, is the freighter being chased by the Vong frigate?"
"No sir, in fact, it looks like the Vong frigate is escorting the freighter. Several coralskippers in the frigate's vicinity were just vaped."
"That's Wedge," Iella said, a hand over her heart. "It has to be."

"Sir, ma'am. If it is the general, then they'll need help to break free. The frigate firing on the other Vong vessels has attracted the attention of two cruisers and several squadrons of coralskippers."
Tycho grimaced. Operation Emperor's Spear was nearing its conclusion, but at the same time, it meant that all fighters were being deployed to ensure that the *Lusankya* could complete its goal. The heavier capital ships were already slugging it out with the Vong capital ships, which outnumbered them three to one. "Do we have anyone in the area?"
Iella quickly checked with the leaders of the fighter squadrons, then looked back. "Twin Suns can get there in time, but their presence might bring more coralskippers with them. All other forces are currently occupied."
Tycho's mind worked fiercely. Making a snap-decision, he nodded. "Send them in."
(0) *(0)*
"Stop me if you've heard this one. A New Republic hero hijacks a Yuuzhan Vong frigate to escape impossible odds and ends up being saved by a squadron of X-wings from a Yuuzhan Vong fleet."
"Very funny, Sharr," Jaina shot back, all the while juking through a wave of coralskippers. Though the transponder and gravimetric output of her engines labeled her as Twin Suns Nine, just the mere presence of the Twin Suns Squadron seemed enough to paint a giant bulls-eye on their fighters. She supposed they were fortunate that, despite being in the thick of it all, they had yet to lose a pilot. Now, however, with a horde of coralskippers chasing them, they were streaking towards several Vong capital ships and even more coralskippers.
Jaina took a moment to question her sanity.
She felt Kyp grin in amusement through their bond and she rolled her eyes good-naturedly.
"*Kyp, Goddess, I have eyes on the freighter and friendly frigate."* Jag reported. Even while avoiding three coralskippers, his voice was as calm and collected as could be. *"The skips heading towards them have changed course and are flying up to meet us."*
Jaina snapped off several shots which blew past a coralskipper's void defenses and devastated the fighter's cockpit. "Twin Suns, anyone who has warheads left head towards the two capital ships. See if you can't at least buy our VIPs some time. The rest of us will stay here and mingle with our guests."
"*Twin Suns Four here, I've got four left. Anyone else feel like adding Vong capital ship silhouettes to their fighter?"*
"*Go ahead, Four, we'll follow you in."*

"*Thanks a lot, Eight."*
Jaina smirked at the half-exasperated, half-sarcastic tone of Zindra's voice. Checking her sensor board, she saw Twin Suns Six, Eight, and Eleven peel off to join Zindra. "Have fun kids."
"We will Goddess, vape some skips for us please."
As they got closer to their goal, Jaina heard a faint voice come through the comm-channel. *"...repeat, this is General Antilles, do you read?"*
"General, this is Twin Suns Nine. Nice ship you got there. Didn't have a spare X-wing lying about?" Jaina quipped lightly, though her brow was furrowed in concentration as she timed her shots with Jag and Kyp to send another coralskipper to a flaming death.
"Very funny, Twin Suns Nine. Both the Ammund Swooper and this ship have taken heavy damage. We would appreciate any help you can give."
"We're helping as much as we can. Twin Suns Four is leading an attack on the Vong cruis...sithspit!" Jaina spun out of the way of a missile, then spun in the opposite direction to avoid plasma fire. "Wish each of us had the skill to take out an entire squadron of coralskippers all by ourselves. It'd make our job a whole lot easier."
"Give us about two more minutes, then we'll be free of Borleias's gravity shadow."
In the distance, Jaina saw gouts of flame erupt from the Vong cruisers, an indication of a successful attack run.
"Why do you Rogue and Wraith Squadron peoples like asking for the impossible?" Jaina muttered. Sharr Latt released another 'Jaina-missile' and a small host of coralskippers went streaking after it, temporarily buying her some time.
"Twin Suns Eight's hit!"
"We've lost Six too." Zindra's voice was full of pain. *"A missile hit a piece of debris between the two of them and got them at the same time. Eleven and I will try to finish up here."*
"The moment you fire the last of your warheads, you get clear, is that understood Four?" Kyp said sharply, having felt Jaina's anguish at losing two pilots.
Zindra, however, didn't respond. Jaina quickly glanced down at her sensor board, Twin Suns Four's transponder was still active. "Zindra, do you copy?"
"This is Twin Suns Eleven. Four is EV. I repeat, Four is EV. When she gets a new X-wing, she'll be able to add another silhouette onto it though."
The front half of one of the Yuuzhan Vong cruiser was a burning wreck, its course gradually taking it towards the gravity well of Borleias. The

course also took the dying ship in front of the other cruiser, preventing it from targeting Wedge's Vong frigate or the Corellian freighter it was escorting. Even then, the dying ship's plasma batteries fired off a continuous salvo of molten material. One last act of defiance before the ship crashed into the planet.
Jaina quickly switch channels. "*Ammund Swooper*, this is Twin Suns Nine. One of our pilots went EV in your area. Can you afford a brief pick up before you make the jump to hyperspace?"
"Ammund Swooper copies. We have your pilot in sight and will try to make a pick-up."
"Twin Suns Two, Nine, a squad of coralskippers has broken off and is heading towards the Swooper and the general's ship." Jag warned.
Kyp's voice came over the comm next. *"Eleven, hang tight, we'll come and reinforce you."*
"Neg-that. My fighter just took a plasma hit. Venting atmosphere…I'll be going down with the cruiser."
"Can you eject?"
"No I…" The transmission ended in static as a small fireball erupted off to the side of the frigate and freighter.
Jaina swore, gunning her engine as hard as it would go towards the allied ships. "*Swooper, do you have her yet?"*
"Bringing her into the hatch now. Estimated time 'til hyperspace jump, forty seconds. The skips will be on us in ten."
"Don't worry Swooper, we've got your back." The voice of Gavin Darklighter was a great relief to all those who heard it. *"Continue your current course, we'll see that you're clear."*
In front of her, Jaina saw streaks of lasers and missile trails slam head on into the approaching coralskipper squadron. Nearly all of the coralskippers were eliminated in the first volley, with the surviving two veering away. Veering away and right into the lasers of Twin Suns. In the meantime, Rogue Squadron began to engage the remaining cruiser, their fighters dancing over and around the hulking ship as they blew off pieces of coral with every pass. The cruiser, with all of its fighter support already dedicated to other areas of the battle field, could not fend off the gnats chewing away at its hull. Twin Suns joined in the fray, forcing the cruiser to attempt an escape back towards the worldship.
Several Rogue Squadron warheads found the dovin basal housing unit and the cruiser's outbound trajectory was halted as large pieces of it went spiraling off into space.
"This is the Ammund Swooper. General Antilles' and our ship is clear to jump, thanks for the escort."

Jaina exhaled and leaned back in her seat. "Any time, Swooper. Any time. "
(0) *(0)*
Tahiri was still recovering from her injuries and was forced to sit the battle out. Not that she minded. She was currently in the hangar bay of the *Freedom* trying to calm the massive Yuuzhan Vong beast that had been evacuated from Coruscant. The rakamat she had recovered during Shaeri's rescue mission didn't like the metallic smells and sounds of the Star Destroyer's hangar. Nor did it like the vast expanse of space it could see through the magnetic field in front of it.
The crew of the *Freedom* was smart enough to keep away from it, which helped to ease its anxiety. Even then, it continued to twitch nervously as the battle raged on beneath it.
Sitting atop its back with Shaeri and several other Freed Ones, Tahiri did her best to ease its fears. It was hard considering the beast was Yuuzhan Vong and thus out of the normal spectrum of the Force. But Tahiri hoped she was getting through to it a little bit. She was by no means an expert on interacting with animals. Yet, she couldn't help but feel attached to the war-beast. The rakamat was young by rakamat standards, and was also relatively tame. Not many people even considered that the creatures the Yuuzhan Vong used actually had feelings of their own. Though the thoughts of these creatures were corrupted by their war hungry masters, it was through no fault of their own. A child of any sort, raised on death and war, would know only those two things for the rest of its life.
"[I think I'll call you 'Little Bantha',]" Tahiri said conversationally, stroking its head. "[You're not so scary or tough are you? Just a harmless little bantha.]"
"[It does have yaret-kor on it. How does that make it harmless?]" Asked one of the other Freed Ones in curious amusement.
Tahiri smiled. "[Well, we know that he will not hurt us. So he is harmless to us, but deadly to our enemies.]"
The Freed One accepted the argument with a nod and continued to polish the silvery spikes that protruded from the 'harmless' beast of war. Another fed the dovin basals attached to the rakamat's back, ensuring that they would be healthy enough for the next combat engagement.
"[I owe my life to him,]" Shaeri said pensively, petting the scaly skin just above the creature's heavily armored eyes. "[I will forever be indebted to you, Little Bantha.]"
Tahiri chuckled softly to herself. She wondered what the others would think when they heard the new name for the fiercely terrifying Yuuzhan

Vong creature of war. As far as these younger Freed Ones were concerned, a bantha was a fearsome war-beast that roamed the harsh deserts of Tatooine and served the Sand People in a purpose similar to that of the rakamat. Tahiri didn't have the heart to tell them otherwise.
The ship-wide comm activated. *"Now hear this, this is Captain Sair Yonka to all crew. Operation Emperor's Spear is about to reach its end stage. Anyone who wants to see some fireworks should either get to the bridge or any of the port-side viewports."*
Tahiri glanced about the numerous Freed Ones in the hangar. She stood to get their attention and then pointed to the port side of the ship. "[Go to this side of the vessel and find a window to look through. There you will witness the demise of Czulkang Lah and the worldship of Domain Hul."
The Freed One looked at her in disbelief for a few moments, before moving to obey. All the Freed Ones, with the exception of Shaeri, were soon out of the hangar.
"You don't want to see the end of Czulkang Lah?" Tahiri asked in Basic, settling back down on Little Bantha.
Shaeri smiled faintly at Tahiri and shook her head. "I knew his life was over the moment he challenged you and Yun-Harla. How he dies is unimportant."
Tahiri reached out for the younger Yuuzhan Vong girl and gripped the teen's hand. With the others gone, Tahiri knew it was safe to say what she wanted to. "Shaeri, you do know that I am not a goddess, right? I am not Yun-Shuno."
Shaeri, however, continued to look serenely at Tahiri. "[What is goddess but someone many people believe in? A true goddess is a being with powers the common person does not have. A true goddess is capable of great destruction, yet is merciful to those who follow her. In form or in spirit, it does not matter. To me and to many others, you will always be Yun-Shuno, our goddess of mercy, and our protector.]"
Tahiri swallowed. "But I have no wish to take advantage of the Freed Ones like that. What would be the point of throwing off the lies of the Supreme Overlord and priestly class if you only exchange it for another set of lies?"
Shaeri responded to Tahiri by shifting and resting her head on the blond Jedi's lap. "[You lie not to hurt us, but to help us. To strengthen and fix what was once broken. A Shamed One who rested her head on the lap of a Yuuzhan Vong would have it removed. But instead, you provide comfort. You do not use us as the True Way practiced by the shapers and priests do. You give us an alternative to the pain where there was once none. Even if it is as you say, and we are exchanging

one lie for another, I will make that same choice over and over again if I had to. The difference is that I can actually choose who to follow, where to rest my head.]"
Shaeri closed her own eyes and curled up comfortably on Little Bantha's back, her head still on Tahiri's lap. "And that is why I follow you, Tahiri Kwaad. My goddess."
(0) *(0)*
Czulkang Lah was silent as he watched the massive triangle ship grow closer and closer. He was silent even though his foolish subordinates around him tried their best to maneuver the Domain Hul worldship out of the way or looked to him for one last miracle. He was silent even when the news that General Antilles had escaped using one of their ships had stirred the bridge into a furious uproar. He had said his last words to his son. Knew what his fate would soon be.
Too many things had gone wrong for the battle to even be considered a victory of any sorts. It was true that they had reclaimed Borleias for the Yuuzhan Vong. But it was also true that most of those responsible for the victory would not live to see it. They had been outsmarted by General Antilles and his machinations. Had been misled too many times by their foolish Peace Brigade allies and infiltrators on the ground. They had fallen for the lying-talk and tricks that had caused them to position their forces improperly. And now they were all paying the price.
His enfeebled eyes focused on the dancing flames leaping out of the giant triangle ship growing closer and closer. From the distance, all his old eyes could see were dancing flickering of red. He focused on it, tuning out the rest of the bridge. All his accomplishments. All the accolades hoisted onto him. They meant nothing now. Honor and respect could not save one from death. Not even one as knowledgeable as he.
Flashes of his youth flickered through his mind. His life had been dedicated to war, to serving his people. And he had done it successfully as well. But then the Yuuzhan Vong had run out of people to conquer, had lost their home-world in the never-ending strife. They were forced to leave their galaxy lest they collapse without a common enemy. And now, the very cycle which sustained their society, one of war and conquest, would destroy them.
As he had taught so many times to countless others; one cannot remain superior indefinitely, one cannot match the invulnerability of the gods. One day, someone will come along and prove with your dying breath that you too were only mortal. You too were flawed. As you breathe your last, you will finally realize that you were not great at

all, but just one more being in a universe of many. You will die, and the enemy will live on. It is why you should never think yourself superior to the foe that you face. For if you do, you will die, and they will live on to mock your name.
Czulkang closed his eyes, tuning out the panicked yells on the bridge. The frantic scurrying to abandon the doomed worldship. He had forgotten his own teachings. Had assumed that these infidels would be just like all the rest that had come before them. And now the Yuuzhan Vong people would pay for it. If he were a lesser man, he would blame his forgetfulness on his age, or on his weariness at having fought for so long. But he would not. In plain in simple terms, he had been beaten.
He took his last breaths as the triangle ship lanced into the worldship. A roaring, deafening sound ringing his ears.
His last thoughts, as the world around him disappeared in flame, were a prayer to his son.
(0) *(0)*
Borleias, several hours later
The New Republic forces staged mop-up and withdrawal operations. Starfigher squadrons collected themselves, escorted rescue shuttles, and defended their capital ships from the uncoordinated attacks of the Yuuzhan Vong.
Even then, they knew that their victory was only temporary. Ultimately, they would have to leave Borleias. Another yammosk would be brought into the system. More Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements would arrive and make the system untenable. But, despite losing the planet, they achieved their objectives.
The stand at Borleias had served its purpose. Countless refugees had fled through the hyperspace route guarded by the New Republic defenders. The Advisory Council and its supporters had enjoyed months in which to plot their next moves—defenses, surrenders, tricks. But the Advisory Council would never know what else had been done during those months: what plans had been made, what foundations had been laid for a resistance that would not depend on them.
Greater was the fact that the New Republic fleet led by Wedge Antilles had once again shown that the Yuuzhan Vong could be slowed, beaten, and outsmarted. Constant updates from Ganner to multiple news channels had kept the galaxy apprised of the success of Wedge's campaign.
At Face and Corran's recommendations, the commanders of the various starships in Wedge's fleet all sent in holovids of the destruction of the Domain Hul worldship. From many different angles, the sight of one of the Yuuzhan Vong's most feared and revered ships vanishing in

a ball of flame was seared into the minds of all. It did not matter that the destruction came at the cost of a Super Star Destroyer. Coupled with Wolam Tser's Battle of Borleias holodocumentary and Pal'iva Konat's Battle of Palanhi, the defeat of the Yuuzhan Vong and their vaunted commander was captured in full, gritty detail.

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Coruscant

On Coruscant, now Yuuzhan'tar, Tsavong Lah learned of the video of Borleias through his spies and immediately flew into a rage. That the infidels would dare parade and celebrate the death of his father in such a fashion, that they would dare humiliate the name of Czulkang Lah, was degrading in the extreme. He immediately summoned Nom Anor, ordering the slippery member of the Intendant Caste to use his contacts to plot revenge. He would see Jaina and Jacen Solo bleed for this affront. He would grind the infidels' cities into dust and ignore their pleas for mercy.

The hollow feeling he had felt at the news of his father's death was filled now only with molten fury. He would crush the last of the infidel fleets in one final, decisive blow. The war had gone on for long enough. The universe he was used to had become too dark. If it was the last thing he did, he would deprive the New Republic of their heroes, just as they had done for the Yuuzhan Vong.

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Situated in the ailing worldship above Coruscant, a crackling Onimi watched the devastation of the Domain Hul worldship again and again. "Like an egg, it cracks, spilling its yolk into space. Oooh how fun it must have looked, the expression on Czulkang's face!" Onimi sang brightly at Shimmra's feet.

"Silence, Onimi!" Shimmra snapped, glaring at the holoprojector, the hated technology that allowed such images of defeat to be shown.

"The gods have left the Domain of Lah, of that they have, my lord. Better to leave them now, lest we be impaled on the same sword."

"Tsavong Lah has earned nothing but victories, Onimi," Shimmra chided. "Do not take the failure of his father for the failure of his son."

"Of course, of course, you are ever wise," Onimi said in sing-song. "Now where is my erella? My pretty vong'erella?"

"I am here, Onimi." The scarless, nameless Yuuzhan Vong stepped out from the shadows behind Onimi's grotto. Her destroyed eye had been replaced by a cybernetic replica, which glowed eerily in the darkness. Though she had been offered a living equivalent, she had wanted to honor Tahiri's heritage by using the infidel's technology. They were, after all, children of Yun-Ne'shel, and had to embrace both worlds.

"Did you have fun on Yuuzhan'tar, my erella?" Onimi grinned. "The Supreme One was ever so kind to let you play with the *Jeedai*."
"It was more than I deserve," the Nameless One bowed her head towards the Supreme Overlord, who merely nodded back in turn.
Onimi affected a sad expression. "But now, my erella, I must send you away. Away, away, far away."
"Have I done something to offend thee?" the Nameless One immediately prostrated herself in front of Onimi's misshapen form. "I will correct it at once."
"Nothing, nothing is wrong. But you have reached the limit of what I can teach. I send you far away to learn, not because of your heart I spurn."
"But where will I go?"
"Deep into space, away from the *Jeedai*. A cloak you will need, shadows and wisdom you'll seek. When you return next year, even I will seem to your eyes, weak."
"That could never happen, Onimi," The Nameless One remained bowing before him.
Onimi's lips twitched into a smile. "Oh but it will. Once you learn all that you can in the space of shadows and fear. Return to us, to me, your master, and to the gods you will near."
"I…I will do as you command, my Onimi."
"Do not despair, my vong'erella." Onimi said, cupping her chin and tilting her head back up to him. His eyes clear with a rare moment of lucidity. "The others may think the gods are with Tsavong and his domain, but they cannot be more than wrong. The gods are with you, my erella, and you alone will unleash their powers."
"As you say," a fervent light shone in the Nameless One's eyes, and she left the room with purposeful strides.
Once she was gone, Shimmra let out a barking laughter. "You amuse me so, Onimi, treating your pets as you do."
"It is what I was born for, and the reason why I you adore," Onimi chimed back jovially. "My people have reported that Nom Anor seeks to help Tsavong with his revenge. Should Tsavong fall and be done, will you then believe my words, Great One?"
"If he falls," Shimmra nodded. "But he will not. I will punish you for voicing such doubts when he returns to Yuuzhan'tar victorious."
"And I shall gleefully accept them, of course." Onimi grinned. He reached over to the holoprojector and again played the destruction of the Domain Hul worldship, singing mindlessly once more.
(0) *(0)*
Mon Calamari

Self-proclaimed Chief of State, Pwoe, faced the horde of news reporters with a toothy smile, waving a hand diplomatically as he addressed question after question.
'What would the New Republic's next step be in the war against the Vong?'
'Will there be an offensive planned to retake Coruscant?'
'Are the rumors that the remaining members of the senate are considering an alliance with the Imperial Remnant true?'
Inwardly, Pwoe could not have been more than furious at the actions of Wedge Antilles. Before the news of Borleias had spread, Pwoe had been in contact with several low ranking Yuuzhan Vong officials to discuss the possibility of a surrender. But once news of the defeat had spread far and wide, those contacts disappeared faster than water in the Tatooine desert. Months of careful planning ruined all because the ex-retired general couldn't follow orders and die gloriously.
The fact that Anakin Solo was missing had also been picked up on and Pwoe had to do his best to reassure the crowd that their favorite Jedi boy was still alive and continuing the fight against the dreaded Vong. A few insinuations and sly responses later, and the crowd of reporters believed that Anakin was on a personal mission for the Chief of State.
"Sir, the rest of the Advisory Council has reconvened on Kuat. Why do you remain here on Mon Cal?"
Pwoe's brow twitched in aggravation. "*I* am the Chief of State. It makes sense that the senate should come to where I am, rather than where they wish to be. Do not forget, it was because of my orders that we achieved the victory at Borleias. Millions of refugees are safe because I ordered General Antilles to hold the line. I should think that it shows that I have, and always will have, the best interest of the New Republic at heart. If the rest of the Advisory Council wants to seize the momentum this victory has given us, then they should dispense with the petty political games and meet with me here. It was my predecessor's games that got us into this mess, and they obviously wish to continue playing those games. I am the Chief of State, not some school teacher willing to entertain the childish actions of those beneath him."
The questions continued, and Pwoe eventually had to excuse himself as his throat became hoarse from all the answering. Retreating to his quarters, he relaxed in a soothing pool of water. He once again cursed General Antilles, the Skywalkers, and everyone else who had thrown his plans into disarray. Why couldn't they see that a peace treaty with the Vong was in everyone's best interests?

He had earlier sent a scathing message to Antilles, and the general had the nerve to send him back a recording of the Battle of Palanhi. It was clear to him that Antilles and the Jedi had made their choice.
Pwoe pulled up a secured communications link and inputted a series of numbers given to him by his contacts. Within seconds, the image of the Peace Brigade appeared on his screen.
"This is Chief of State Pwoe." The Quarren cleared his throat. "About that deal we were discussing."
The others had made their choice, and now this was his.
(0) *(0)*
The Home
Eyes, striated with the faintest of yellow, stared into the blood red blade shimmering before him. The blade, newly made, was so unlike his lambent saber. The hilt was comprised of metal of the deepest black, taken from the asteroid itself. Encased within the abyssal sheath were the echoes of a dying planet; a piece of Sernpidal that had crystalized during its destruction. The pitch-black crystal was every bit as cold and dead as his lambent was alive and warm.
Time had no meaning.
There was only cold and warm.
Alive and dead.
Opposites that had more meanings than possible. He had learned a great deal of things about the Force, gained the answers to the questions he had had, a new perspective. And it was all thanks to his teacher:
Brisha Syo
Another name wrapped in mystery. He had been training under her guidance for the past month and a half. Explored a side of the Force that he had only read about. Had only wondered of. It was intoxicating. Like having his eyes fully open after seeing the universe by only squinting. The Force and *all* its aspects was every bit as amazing as he thought it would be. He had found a balance he had been missing.
Dark to augment the light.
Two halves to create a whole.
Certainty where there was once doubt.
Where before he had second-guessed himself, his own views of the Force, those doubts had been banished. Learning about the darker side of the Force had enabled him to better understand the Force as a whole. He was no longer worried about becoming his grandfather. He knew who he was and what he had to do. He was a Jedi. Yet he was not like the Jedi of his time.

As he stared at the glowing red blade of his new saber, words whispered through his mind like the wind; the lessons he had learned during his stay on the asteroid. If there was anything Brysha Syo had been absolutely right about, it was that the Force was only what he could make of it, and not what anyone told him it was. But she had also given him many things to consider.

There was no dark or light side, just the Force. It was a point Brisha Syo emphasized whenever she began elaborating on Force techniques that some might consider 'dark'. The Force existed in all living things regardless of whether or not one could actually sense it. Whether in war or in piece, Yuuzhan Vong or other race, the Force flowed through all. It all depended on the intent and emotions of the user that made the *usage* of the Force light or dark.

He had learned that feeling intense emotions such as hate, love, anger, and desire were fine so long as you didn't let those feelings control what you did. It was when one started acting out of hate, out of anger or desire that one began to shade the Force with their actions. That was where intention came in. One could kill to protect the person they loved, or kill *for* the person they loved. One could use the anger one felt at having a loved one's life threatened to enhance one's own abilities to better protect that person. Or one could use anger as a way of relieving one's own suffering and pain by taking it out on another. And in many ways, Brisha's teachings made sense.

Anakin could definitely understand why the Jedi Order of old would take the straight and narrow approach. It was better to err on the side of caution than to teach the countless Jedi that it was okay to kill with the Force, to embrace your emotions, but only 'sometimes.' And then leave it up to the individual judgments of the very unique Jedi being sent to the far-flung corners of the galaxy as to when that 'sometimes' was. It was an extremely murky area that few would be able to successfully navigate. Rather than take that risk, it was far easier to teach all the Jedi that feelings beyond peace and serenity were bad. Unfortunately, the fact that these Jedi Orders of old all seemed to fall apart at one time or another showed that even erring on the side of caution couldn't sustain it indefinitely.

A second blade hummed to life, and a grim smile came to his face. He turned to face his co-apprentice, through their Force bond sensing her excitement, her anger and bloodlust. He tempered them with his control and patience, all the while accepting what it was within her that motivated her to act. This understanding enabled him to predict her movements before she had even considered them.

He spun around, a blade of blood flashing as it collided with her red-orange lambent blade. A silver blade emerged, and he parried its swing, while quickly knocking aside the other. She moved like a huntress, waiting, watching, and then darting in at the slightest change of his breathing, the smallest twitch of his muscles.
His attention shifted from blade to blade, their pulsating energies the only warmth in the icy, cold room. There was only the faintest of atmosphere and gravity within their training and living areas. The asteroid, and all the pain and suffering that went with their harsh training, was all they had known for the past month. The galaxy and the greater war going on were not even fleeting thoughts in their minds. Much of his time spent on the asteroid had felt like a dream, where the boundaries between reality and fiction were blurred. At one time, he even thought he had had a conversation with his siblings; as impossible as it seemed.
One of her blades skimmed his arm, shaking him from his thoughts. In retaliation, he swung his saber a couple of times to force her back, before drawing in all the heat in the air around them; an ability that they had been forced to master or they would have frozen to death long ago. He focused this warmth into the palm of his icy cold non-sword hand, where it ignited in a dancing blue blaze. With a lazy thrust of his hand, he sent a blast of Force created fire towards his Twi'lek opponent. She, however, crossed both her blades and endured the powerful stream of heat until the deadly flames completely died away. The air around them rapidly cooled once more, leaving only trails of steam and the vapor of their breath in its wake.
He smirked, her excitement pushing him to continue the match; the pain in his arm becoming a source from which he could draw his strength upon. He used the pain to enhance his speed, darting behind his opponent almost playfully. She responded by quickly shifting both her sabers over her shoulder, blocking his attack and letting the momentum of the impact carry her forward and out of the way.
She came out of her roll and hurled one of her sabers at him. He knocked it back towards her, then reached out through the Force again, his sight shifting.
His opponent flashed him a feral grin and charged at him. He saw her through the Force. A dirty grey blur of energy racing through the dead, grey hues of the room. She would have been invisible in the Force to anyone else who hadn't trained with her non-stop for the past month. He could see every twitch of her muscles, hear her every thought. With a single flick of his hand, he caught her mid-leap.
He had won once again.

He blinked to return his sight to normal.
She was smiling victoriously.
He then realized that she was only holding one lightsaber, and that the other was missing. The yorik-coral, lambent one. The one that he wouldn't have been able to sense due to the fact that he wasn't using his own lambent saber.
He had temporarily stopped using his lambent lightsaber once he realized that it had become a crutch to him. Though it helped him sense the Yuuzhan Vong, he also had to tune everything else out to do so. Theoretically, if the Force existed in all life, he should have been able to sense both Yuuzhan Vong and the normal Force at the same time. Relying on his lambent for so long had trained his mind and Force abilities into 'seeing' the galaxy in a certain way. Just as Brisha had helped 'un-train' him of everything he had learned so that he could learn the Force from a different perspective, he too had to rethink how he was viewing the Yuuzhan Vong. It was still a work in progress, and he was still searching for a way to both sense the Yuuzhan Vong and feel the Force at the same time.
If he had found a way, he might have seen the missing saber.
"It's behind me, isn't it?"
"Aren't you going to look and see?"
He set her down and watched as the lambent saber danced past his face. Despite the kiss they had shared at the start of their training, they had yet to go any further or do anything more. Still, that single act had connected them on an emotional level that surprised even Anakin. He had to admit that he was glad Alema was with him and definitely counted her as one of his best and closest friends.
"Congratulations, your first victory."
"It won't work on you twice."
"A trick only needs to work once."
A single figure began clapping, and the masked and cloaked features of Brisha Syo emerged from the shadows. "And with that, it is time for you to rejoin the world of the living. I have taught you what is necessary for now. Now it is your job to use what you've learned and stop the Yuuzhan Vong."
"The vacation's over, then?"
"You are more than welcome to return; when the time is right. Just as you have your parts to play, I have played mine."
"Thank you, for all that you have taught us."
"No. Thank you. I wouldn't need the Force to foresee that the galaxy is in for some interesting times."
(0) Chapter End *(0)*

A\N: Hope you enjoyed Rebel Stand. Next chapter, next week. Anakin and Alema will share a small adventure in the next chapter before they get back to their friends. To those worried, no, Anakin hasn't gone completely dark…I've just laid the ground work for a *possible* fall later on in his life =). More seriously, I'm working off the initial canon plan to have Anakin learn a new way to fight the Yuuzhan Vong during his little *Traitor* moment; which comes with a new understanding of the Force as a whole.
In other news, my 'Deleted Scenes' document has reached a hundred pages…sigh…all those ideas that didn't quite fit. There are about thirty-six pages worth of scenes that didn't make it into the *Dark Journey* portion of the story, another twenty for the Rebel Dream/Stand, and the rest are for the later chapters. I might start tacking on a couple of scenes after every chapter if there is a high enough interest, so please let me know via pm or in your review if it's something you would prefer.
In any case, please review if you so desire.

ADA 20 Interlude III

Twenty
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"*As the first President of Peace City, I hereby give the galaxy my solemn vow that things will change for the better. I understand that mistakes have been made by the Peace Brigade in the past, but I am talking about the future. We here are dedicated to ending this war in as quick and as bloodless a way as possible. To prove this, we are now tripling the bounty for any Jedi fugitives handed over to us. No expense will be spared to remove their disrupting and dangerous presence from this galaxy.*
Additionally, I am in conversation with members of the Corellian leadership, who have expressed interest in an alliance with Ylesia. Together, one system at a time, we will usher in a new and brighter era of peace. Dictated not by the despotic Jedi and their mystic ways, but by discipline, loyalty, and a sense of honor. I welcome any and all systems willing to join our cause. We want this war over just as much as the New Republic does. No more blood need be spilled on behalf of a small majority that has been controlling the government since the beginning of time."
Anakin shut off the feed from the HoloNet. He and Alema had been getting themselves caught up on the over two months of time they had missed. A series of victories and defeats, a fluctuating frontline, and

scheming politicians, seemed to have left the galaxy in a state pretty similar to the one they had left.
Some things never changed.
Not among them was the dwindling amount of supplies in his and Alema's X-wings. Just traveling was a challenge. Like most hyperspace routes, the Hydian Way was mined with dovin basals, waiting for an unsuspecting ship. This forced the two of them to take lesser known routes or to improvise and trust that the Force wouldn't get the two of them blown up. Due to the fall of Borleias, most of the Outer and Mid Rim worlds now played host to a Yuuzhan Vong garrison, so finding a place to restock their food-stores was proving difficult
"*I've got a planet on my scopes."*Alema reported. *"Sensors aren't picking up any Vong."*
"I suppose we're just far enough away from the Hydian Way that they haven't made their way out here yet." Anakin checked his own readings. A planet with six moons loomed in the distance. "That last jump took us into the Expansion Region as well, so we're right on that line between Vong and non-Vong held space."
"*Think the people on this planet will let us refuel our ships and bodies? These X-wings really aren't meant for long periods of travel."*
"Only one way to find out," Anakin responded. "Starcharts ID the planet as Shili. Their people are spacefaring so they should have a starport somewhere."
"*And it looks like it has a nice tropical climate. Balmy weather, sunshine, and a pleasant breeze."*
"You were the one who wanted to come along with me to the asteroid," Anakin said wryly. "After this planet, don't say I didn't take you anywhere nice."
"*I'm detecting barely any space traffic. If these people are spacefaring, they don't seem to have much in the way of ships."*
"I copy; I'm detecting three…maybe four vessels also approaching the planet." Anakin paused as his comm-board lit up. "Hang on, they're transmitting."
"*This is Peace Brigade frigate, Reconciliation, flag of Commander General Rinmek; to approaching X-wings: State your business or we will open fire."*
Anakin's eyebrows shot up and he quickly improvised and took a wild stab as to why Peace Brigade would be above the remote planet.
"We're here to assist with the capture of the Jedi on the planet."
"*You're the mercenaries we were told would join us? We were told to expect Mandalorians."*

Knowing an opening when he saw one, Anakin continued his charade. "They passed on the assignment. Didn't President Shesh inform the Commander General that we were sent to replace them instead? She spent enough credits on us."
"*Of course the Commander General was informed,"* snapped the response.
"*Someone's touchy,"*Alema said through a separate channel.
"If the Commander General was informed, then you know what our job is."
"*We are well aware that you are here to evaluate Commander General Rinmek's status. Please keep in mind that you are observers only. We do not need your help in capturing the Jedi on the planet."*
"But as observers, we will be required to accompany your forward teams," Anakin said glibly. "Unless, of course, you would like our reports to contain less than satisfactory opinions of the Commander General?"
"*You're having fun with this,"*Alema chuckled.
As the Peace Brigade comm-operator fumed over one channel, Anakin replied to his Twi'lek counterpart. "Of course. Something tells me that the Commander General is on the outs with Shesh and his other bosses."
"*Why else would they send him out here to hunt a lone Jedi in a frigate that's over thirty years old?"*
"*X-wings, you are to follow us onto the planet. The Commander General wishes to talk to you once you touch down."*
"Of course," Anakin said, rolling his eyes.
He sidled his fighter up alongside the Peace Brigade frigate and prepared for entry into the planet's atmosphere. He supposed he was lucky his New Republic flightsuit, and anything else marking him as a Jedi, had been destroyed on the asteroid. Instead, he was clad in flowing black robes and an all-purpose rebreather mask that covered the lower half of his face. With a pale, gaunt face—due to a combination of the meager helpings of food he had been given and a rigorous exercise regimen—and piercing blue eyes framed by wildly kept hair, he looked very little like 'Anakin Solo the poster child of the New Republic'.
Though there was less chance of recognition on her part, Alema had also undergone a similar transformation. Her lekku was decorated in an intricate array of black glyph-like designs. Over her black tank-top, she wore an equally black leather jacket, matched with knee-high boots. She looked every bit the dangerous predator as the aura she exuded would suggest. Her time on the asteroid had shaped, honed

and focused the anger she had towards the Vong so that it was now a very lethal weapon at her disposal.
The two followed the Peace Brigade frigate and a troop transport down to the planet, taking note of the supply ship they left in orbit.
"*Hey, what happens when the actual mercenaries we're playing get here?"*
"We can try to bluff our way out. If we're lucky, the Commander General will kill them thinking *they're* the imposters."
"*And if that doesn't work?"*
"We'll worry about that when it gets to that point. Besides, you sensed it too, didn't you?"
"*The Vong on the Peace Brigade frigate? I'm just able to feel them now that we're this close to it."*
"You lose one star system, and suddenly everyone's evaluating your movements."
"*Who do you think the Jedi on the planet is?"*
"I don't know. I'm wondering about that too. I don't think Uncle Luke has anyone out here."
"*Could be another Jedi acting independently?"*
"Possibly. We'll find out more when we land."
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They landed within an open field of red and white grass just outside a sloping valley, the bottoms of their ships brushing over the tops of a nearby jungle on their final approach.
Anakin and Alema were the first to disembark their ships, the warm and comfortable wind a welcome sensation after months of cold. Shili's moons dotted the bright, morning sky, faint silhouettes in the light of the shining sun.
"Ahhh," Alema sighed happily, stretching. "It's good to be out of that fighter."
Anakin had to admit that it was quite a relief to stretch muscles that had been cramped up within his fighter for the last several hours. He took a moment to just enjoy the fresh air and light of the sun, his dark robes fluttering loosely in the breeze.
He was armed with just a vibroblade and blaster, his lightsabers strapped to his ankles. In addition to his different than normal appearance, he opted to keep his rebreather on for added disguise. Once again he wondered just how the two of them were going to pull off his latest on-the-fly plan.
Watching the Peace Brigade troop transport unload several dozen disreputable looking people was almost painful. The rag-tag force,

dressed in various uniforms and armor, formed up loosely around the ramp of the frigate.
Recognizing Commander General Rinmek from the many times the man had chased them during their trip *to* Brisha's asteroid, Anakin could tell that the times had not been good for him either. The man had heavy bags under his eyes, his hair was unkempt, and there was a slight slouch in the way the man walked.
One of the men following Rinmek saw both Anakin and Alema and made a beeline for them, distaste written all over his face. "I know what you are here for, but you *will* show Commander General Rinmek respect, am I clear?"
Anakin made a faint motion to Alema, who was much better at acting. His Twi'lek counterpart didn't disappoint. Despite being shorter than the commander general's aide by a good head, Alema sashayed her way over to him and evaluated him with a frosty expression.
"'Commander General Rinmek has no clear control over his subordinates,'" Alema said, as if narrating a report. She made an obvious glance back towards the ranks of the Peace Brigade soldiers. "'Lacks discipline in his ranks. His soldiers are better off as cannon fodder.'"
The aide's face purpled. "See here! We are doing are duty to this galaxy while you parasites do this only for credits!"
"'Will evaluate how the commander general deals with insubordinate subordinates,'" Alema continued over his protest, loosening the blaster at her side. She pulled it and made a show of checking its charge. "'If found lacking, will execute the subordinate myself.'"
The aide's jaw snapped shut, and he slunk back off to Rinmek, who was giving orders to his troops.
Anakin subtly clapped his hands as Alema tilted her head in playful acknowledgment.
"You're right, bossing the Peace Brigade guys around *is* fun," Alema whispered. "I don't think I'll have any problem with this role."
Commander General Rinmek finished with the soldiers and walked over to Anakin and Alema, his posture straightening as he did.
"Commander General. You may call me…" Anakin paused for a moment to think of an alias, and then noticed a drop of grease on the man's uniform. "Dab, Oia Dab. This is my associate, Blue."
Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Alema mouthing the name he had given her in disbelief. He smothered a smile as Rinmek nodded impetuously. "I am well aware of why you came, so let us dispense with any pleasantries."

"And here I thought we could be friends," Alema said with a dramatic sighed. "Our report would have looked so much better."
Rinmek glared at her, then returned his attention to Anakin. "To the point. Our sympathizers on this planet have informed us that a Jedi lives deep in the forest. She isn't one of Skywalker's, but one of the older ones."
"A survivor of the Emperor's purges?"
"Precisely," Rinmek glanced dubiously at the people with him. "Which makes her all the more dangerous. I do not know why you have come after all, when it is clear that the president has set me up to fail. Those fools guarding the perimeter think themselves Peace Brigade, but I doubt they could even find a fish on Mon Calamari. You say you want to join them in the front ranks, by all means, go ahead. I take no responsibility if that Jedi ends up killing the both of you."
"That won't happen," Anakin said drolly, as if he was growing bored with the conversation. In actuality, he was picking up on Alema's alarm. One of the Yuuzhan Vong they had sensed earlier was among the aides attending Rinmek.
"Well, we won't find this Jedi just sitting out here," Alema spoke. "What are we waiting for?"
"Our sympathizers are to meet us here and guide us into the jungle to the Jedi's location. And here they are."
They turned to see three speeders cutting through the red and white grass. Another dozen or so people, all with red and white colorings similar to the grass they were passing through, joined the ranks of the Peace Brigade. The leader in charge of this new group, walked up to Rinmek, Alema, and Anakin. He wore several different pelts and had multiple necklaces composed of various teeth and claws hanging from his neck. From his long, developed, montrals and lekku, it was clear that he and those with him were Togruta.
"Welcome to Shili, Commander General Rinmek. I am Clan Leader Losta. May you and the Yuuzhan Vong live long."
"Clan Leader, do you know where the Jedi is? I wish for this mission to go smoothly and quickly, and to leave this planet as soon as possible."
Losta motioned to the vast growth of trees behind them. "It is why I directed you to this field, commander general. The Jedi you seek lies deep in that jungle. She inhabits an old temple of our people. She is not an easy prey to hunt. Several of us have already gone in after her in hopes of presenting her to you, but they have not returned."
"Of course, or we would be having a different conversation," Rinmek said dismissively. "You and the rest of your clan will lead us to this ancient temple and to the Jedi. When we kill or capture her, your

loyalty shall be rewarded and Shili shall be made a part of the great Yuuzhan Vong Empire."
"It will be an honor to lead our people into that great era," the Togrutan crossed his arms over his chest and bowed.
Rinmek signaled to his ship, and a larger hatch opened up to reveal to AT-TE open-aired walkers. Swiveling turrets were mounted on the railings that surrounded the open top, while several saw-like devices were attached to appendages out in front. As the two larger walkers emerged from the ship, four one-person walkers followed. Anakin recognized them as very old models of the Espo walkers.
"I don't see why you say you are being set up to fail," Anakin said mildly, his surprise genuine. "I doubt a single Jedi can handle your ground troops, the locals, *and* these walkers."
"One Jedi managed to kill hundreds of Vong by himself," Rinmek said calmly. "I doubt it would take twenty Vong to finish this lot off. You do the math."
"Will you be joining us on this hunt?" Alema asked.
Rinmek shook his head. "I will be in the *Reconciliation* in orbit. Should you all fail, I will bombard the area the Jedi is in and blast her to bits. The Vong don't care if I bring in a Jedi alive or dead."
"That's good to know," Anakin replied wryly. "And I suppose you won't bother to confirm if all of us are dead?"
"No hard feelings now," Rinmek replied in an equally dry tone.
"No hard feelings," Anakin nodded. "If you are not here, who will be leading this attack?"
"My colonel here is more than capable," Rinmek motioned to one of his subordinates. "Colonel Eas has been with me since the beginning and I trust no one else but him."
Anakin and Alema exchanged glances. The man Rinmek had picked out was the Vong they had sensed. Anakin inclined his head. "It will be good to work with you, colonel."
"You as well," the colonel said, his voice almost mocking.
Rinmek boarded his ship again. "Good luck, and good hunting."
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The journey into the jungle was a long one, filled with the monotony of the AT-TE's mechanical noises as it pressed through the foliage. The wildlife had all gone silent, as if knowing that a terrible hunter was crashing through their homes. The center of the jungle was very thick, too dense to pass through even with the walkers. Losta instead led them along the side of the jungle near a deep ravine, where rocky soil allowed only a sparse growth of the red and white foliage they were having so much trouble with.

Alema, Anakin, and Colonel Eas rode atop one of the AT-TE's while their Togrutan guides walked along in front. The other Peace Brigade soldiers on the top of the walker glanced about nervously as they swung their mounted E-web cannons back and forth. The towering trees on one side, and the deep drop on the other, only added to their aggravation.
"Calm down," Alema muttered loudly. She was resting at the back end of the walker, eyes closed. "If the Jedi was going to attack, she'd kill all of you first. Probably drop straight down into this walker where your big guns won't do you any good."
This naturally made the Peace Brigade gunners more nervous, some even pulling their side-arms and glancing up at the canopy of red and white above them.
"Ja…My brother would love this place," Anakin remarked, noting the variety of plants and seeing the occasional terrified animal.
"Is that so," Colonel Eas replied neutrally.
"He's sort of a nut for living things and nature." Anakin said. "Thinks that they're a whole lot better than anything a factory can churn out."
"And what do you think, Mr. Dab?"
"In many ways he's right." Anakin glanced over the side of the walker to note the deep ravine on the jungle's edge. "Nothing can really beat the smell of fresh air and the daily rhythm of life."
"But in other ways?"
"Let's just say I'd miss the comforts of life if I had to live out among wild… animals." Anakin trailed off. He had sensed it. The presence of another Force-sensitive. The touch had been quick and piercing, skimming off the outer layers of his thoughts before he had even realized she was there. From the startled expression on Alema's face, the same thing had happened to her.
"Is there something wrong, Mr. Dab?"
Anakin glanced briefly at Alema, and then the two abruptly hurled themselves over the side of the AT-TE. In the next instant, the towering trees they were passing came crashing down on the vehicle. The heavy trees were too much for the walker and it was shoved over into the ravine where it burst into flame.
The AT-TE in the back suffered a similar fate, knocked over the edge by falling trees. In the meantime, the Peace Brigade infantry, Togruta sympathizers, and the Espo one-man walkers were scattering in panic. The way forward was blocked by the downed trees, as was the way back. The only way to go was through a much more dense part of the jungle.

Colonel Eas, who had also leaped out of the doomed walker, quickly rallied the others by shooting several who were advocating for a quick retreat. "We are here to kill the Jedi! We are not leaving until she's dead."
A blur of motion burst out of the tall, two-toned grass. The Peace Brigade members who were closest were instantly impaled on two blades of energy; one emerald green lightsaber blade, and one yellow-green blade that was slightly shorter than the other. The blades extinguished, and the attacker melted back into the jungle flora.
The Espo walkers and other Peace Brigade members whirled around and began firing. It didn't seem to matter if they were hitting anything or not, and some even fell due to friendly fire.
"Enough!" Colonel Eas roared.
The guns fell silent. When the smoke cleared, ten bodies lay on the ground. Six with lightsaber wounds.
"Form up," Colonel Eas ordered. "Walkers on either side, infantry in the middle. Mr. Dab and Ms. Blue will watch our backs, I will lead the front."
A headcount revealed only twenty Peace Brigade infantry left, and all sixteen Togruta sympathizers. Without their heavy walker support, however, they were exceptionally vulnerable.
Very reluctantly, the Peace Brigade members closed ranks and followed Colonel Eas into the forest.
"For an old lady, that Jedi sure kicked butt," Alema murmured, now actively sweeping the area with her Force senses. "She can also hide pretty well too."
"She'd have to," Anakin replied softly. "If she's a survivor from before the Empire, she'd have to keep out of the sights of all the Emperor's hunters."
It kind of makes you wonder just how many of those old timers are still alive and kicking," Alema said, tensing as she felt a shift in the Force.
Sure enough, the Jedi they were searching for leaped out from the jungle growth and onto one of the Espo walkers. She jammed both of her sabers through the transparasteel cockpit barrier, then leaped back to cover as the walker exploded. Blaster fire rang out again, but it was clear she was gone once more.
"Don't you people have any ysalmiri?" Anakin asked aloud.
"They were in the second AT-TE, in protective cages," the nearest Peace Brigader said, obviously shaken by the loss of another walker.
A lightsaber flashed out of the growth and severed the legs of another Espo walker; only two were left.
"That Jedi's the one hunting us," Alema said with an amused scoff.

The further into the jungle they went, the less light got through the canopy of leaves above. Even as the Togrutan guides took them towards the temple, the Jedi continued her hit and run attacks. A Peace Brigade or two in one run. Another Espo walker in another. It became a new sort of rhythm, with every attack followed by a dwindling number of blasters returning fire.

One thing people were noticing, however, was that none of the Togrutan sympathizers were being attacked. Neither were Colonel Eas, Mr. Dab, or Ms. Blue.

"Forget this!" One of the last eight Peace Brigaders cursed. "I'm not getting paid enough to die in this waste-pit of a jungle!"

A blaster sounded, and everyone looked to see Colonel Eas holding a smoking blaster. "Then I will just have to dock your pay. Anyone else wish to leave?"

The remaining seven Peace Brigaders, backed by the Espo walker, raised their guns at Colonel Eas. "Go to hell, Colonel!"

Anakin and Alema mimicked the other Peace Brigaders and held up their blasters too. "They have a point Colonel Eas. There is no way we can win now. We should fall back and think of a new idea."

"We can still kill the *Jeedai*!"

"Your Vong accent's showing," Alema said drolly, then fired her blaster. The ruby-red darts stitched a pattern across the colonel's chest. But rather than go down, the colonel only seemed to get angry.

"You dare!"

"Waste 'em boys!" one of the Peace Brigaders yelled.

Immediately, the lone walker and six other blasters opened up. Colonel Eas staggered, then collapsed under the onslaught.

"I think it's best if we get out of here now," Anakin said lightly. "We can leave the colonel to the animals."

"There's no way the Commander General's going to take us back." One of the Peace Brigaders said despondently.

"Have you thought of a new line of work?" Anakin asked. "I hear Talon Karrde's organization can always use people capable of individual thought."

"Right! We can leave the Peace Brigade!" The man said, as if the idea was an entirely alien thought before.

"First we have to get the heck out of this jungle!" Another stammered.

"That's easy, follow the trail of dead guys," Alema pointed. "Then go over the fallen tree that took out the AT-TE. Although, I'm sure Clan Leader Losta knows an easier way back. Don't you?"

All eyes turned to the Togrutan guides. Losta smirked and nodded. "I do. But why should I share it with scum like the Peace Brigade?"

"Because they're reformed?" Anakin tried.
"Don't bother, Anakin," Alema said aloud, shrugging sympathetically as her voice carried through the silent jungle. "If I were him, I wouldn't let any of us leave either. He *was* working with the Jedi after all."
The two were suddenly buffeted by waves of Force energy full of wild emotions. Despair. Rage. Hurt. Guilt. Sorrow.
Anakin immediately whirled around, summoning his new lightsaber into his hand as the Jedi launched herself out of the foliage at him. He barely activated it in time as two blades crackled against its blood-red length.
"Alema, stay back!" Anakin barked, as the Peace Brigade and Togruta guides gasped in surprise.
Anakin shoved his attacker back, but she was on him again in an instant. Blades flashing one at a time, then in harmony, ripping through the air around him. If it hadn't been for his matches with Alema, Anakin would have found the dual style more than a little difficult to defend against. As it was, he was just barely keeping up.
He felt the Jedi get a grip on him through the Force, and before he could stop it, he was thrown hard against a nearby tree. His rebreather fell away from impact, and he tumbled to the ground. Before the Jedi could continue her attack, however, Alema sped between the two of them, her own dual sabers active.
"Get out of the way," the older Jedi whispered, her voice tinged with a touch of madness. She was an older Togruta. White and blue lines marked thick and fully developed montrals, while lekku trailed down her back and shoulders. Despite the time that had passed since her glory days; her skin was still smooth, her body toned, and her face seemingly ageless. Her eyes, however, told a much different story. They were hardened chips of blue stone, emotionless and almost dead.
"I can't do that," Alema said from behind the glow of her sabers. "Anakin and I aren't your enemies. We don't want to fight you."
"Anakin died," the Togruta said with a raspy voice, as if she was not used to talking. "There is nothing left of him. There's only Vader…"
"Vader? Wait, are…?"
"You're talking about Anakin Skywalker, aren't you?" Anakin whispered with wide eyes, interrupting Alema and gently pushing her arms down to lower her twin sabers. "My grandfather."
The Togruta raised her lightsabers once more at his approach, but then faltered slightly seeing his face. "Your grandfather…"
"Grandfather," Anakin nodded, clipping his lightsaber back to his belt. "I'm Anakin Solo."

A myriad of expressions registered across the Togruta's face, before she deactivated both her lightsabers. In the background, the Peace Brigade survivors began to murmur amongst themselves. Seeing this, Alema left the two other Jedi and calmly draped an arm around two of the Peace Brigaders, effectively ending any conversation.
"Anakin had children?" The Togruta whispered softly, then smiled and looked to the canopy above. "Of course, that senator. I always wondered why he would…"
"You…you knew my grandfather?" Anakin asked gently.
The Togruta eyed him briefly and let out a dry laugh. "I thought I did. For a time I was his apprentice."
"His apprentice? You mean Vader's…"
"I mean Anakin Skywalker!" The Togruta snapped. "Not that barely human wreck that took him away."
"Sorry…"
"No, it's okay," the Togruta waved a hand dismissively and began to walk away.
Anakin kept pace. "Can you tell me a little about him? I only know what the holovids and rumors say about him."
"It's in the past, he's dead," the Togruta said shortly. "You're better off with the holovids. Remember this kid, you may think yourself a Jedi, controlling the Force and all, but in the end, you've really changed nothing. Empires rise and fall, heroes come and go. But there's a reason they rise and fall and come and go in such a predictable cycle. Nothing they do really changed anything at all. You can dedicate your entire life serving some government, but when that government collapses, what was the point of your living in the first place? Sure you can save lives, but more people die anyways. The Force is a cruel, harsh thing that never should exist in the first place."
The Togruta lashed out with her hand and bowled over several trees with a powerful blast of Force energy. Rage and sorrow swirling around her like a storm cloud. "Do you know what it's like, finding out that everything you've been taught, everything you've grown up wanting to be, was just a load of children's tales and wishful thinking? Watching as the galaxy burns apart before your very eyes by someone you once admired and trusted? Feeling…feeling his saber run you through, even as you plead for him to go back to the person you once knew, and watch him walk away as he leaves you for dead? And worst of all, being able to do nothing about it at all! I died that day Darth Vader stabbed me. Died because I knew that I had failed completely. He was my master but I couldn't even tell he was falling to the dark side? If I had known…if I had done something…If! If! If!"

The Togruta trailed off and let out an anguished cry, sinking to her knees and gripping her head.
"And now, the galaxy is in another war again. Jedi and people are dying, again. It is as if every contribution the Jedi of old made had gone to waste. As if we had all died for nothing. As if we had all lived for nothing."
Anakin closed his eyes. The anguish of the older Jedi a blazing nova as nearly a half-century of pent up grief and guilt exploded out from her. Hesitantly, he placed a hand on her bare shoulder. "The Jedi of the Republic era, even of the Empire, didn't die for nothing. Their lives still inspire the Jedi of today. The great feats they accomplished, even if we are learning about it a little at a time, are the stuff all little Jedi want to mimic when they grow up. It's what continues to drive us in this war. We fight not only for our lives, but because we don't want that rich history of the Jedi that came before us to be lost forever. Even Anakin Skywalker, in the end, returned and destroyed the Emperor and saved my uncle and the entire galaxy."
The Togruta let out a harsh, choked sob.
"I bear my grandfather's name because my mother, his daughter, wanted the galaxy to remember the name Anakin for something more than as a servant of the Emperor. Wanted them to know that Anakin Skywalker was a hero in the end." Anakin leaned against a nearby tree and slid to the ground. "For the longest time, I thought my name was a curse. I was either going to go dark, just like my namesake, or get crushed under the pressure my mom placed on me. I mean, how was I supposed to measure up to someone like Anakin Skywalker? There isn't exactly a manual that tells you how to be a hero and redeem one of the most hated names in the galaxy."
The Togruta glanced sidelong at Anakin, studying him for a long moment. Finally, she said two words. "Ahsoka Tano."
"I'm sorry?"
"My name," the Togruta murmured softly. "I haven't used it in decades. Ahsoka Tano was that naïve and trusting apprentice to Anakin Skywalker. She thought he was one of the best Jedi out there. Always willing to bend the rules, risking life and limb for the most ridiculous of missions. To her, Anakin Skywalker was unbeatable, her best friend and teacher. Her hero. When the Jedi Order expelled her, he was the only one she trusted. He let her go off on her own, to discover herself. When…when Vader appeared, she was off searching for a moving planet. And she felt it all. The death of the Jedi Master who had found her, the death of the younglings who had been her friends. She hurried back, searching for her own master, knowing that if she found him,

he'd make everything right again. As she returned, the signal from the temple recalling all Jedi was changed to a warning to keep everyone away. The news said that the Jedi were traitors who were to be killed on sight. Still, though, she returned to the temple. Crawling through ventilation and maintenance shafts. She knew that her master would have also ignored the warning. He was always so reckless, diving head firsts into situations and coming up with plans later…"

Anakin swallowed, images began to flash through his mind as Ahsoka recalled what she had discovered within the temple. The horrible truth of who was behind the massacre.

Shock. Denial. Someone had to have manufactured the video. Tampered with it to make it show such lies. There was no way her master, her friend and protector, had done what the videos were showing. She tried to reach out to him through their Force bond, but he had blocked her out. Rage and grief. She wanted answers. She tried to plead with him through the Force, but he was no longer the person she knew. Had it been her fault? What if by choosing exile she had been partly responsible for his fall?

Stunned, filled with guilt, she fled Coruscant. The next few years were spent in hiding. Watching as the Empire rose. Watching every HoloNet newsfeed about the demise of another Jedi survivor at the hands of the black-armored monstrosity that had once been her master. All the while wondering, fearing, unable to believe the turn her life had taken. She had devoted her entire young life to the Order, never even knew her parents because of them. Then they expelled her, and then they all died. And it was only her, alone. All alone. Oh sure, she had discovered much about herself during that time on the run. Discovered just what she was capable of doing now that the mockery that was the Jedi Order was truly dead and gone. Choosing to walk away from all the doctrines, her heroes, and her teachers had ironically enough saved her life. Or whatever she could call her existence as she fled from one planet to the next.

She eventually grew tired of running. Began to strike back. There was no Order to limit her any more, no one to lecture her about her feelings and thoughts. It had become almost a sad game for her. She had started with small Imperial outposts. The stormtroopers, no matter how numerous, never had a chance. Dark side? Who cared, the light side, and the myriad of lessons drilled into her since she had been a child obviously hadn't saved Master Yoda or Plo Koon or even Anakin.

A year passes. Eventually Darth Vader catches up to her. For some reason, maybe it's the foolish hope that she could convince him to change his ways, she deactivates her lightsaber. She recognizes the

Force-presence of her master even though it is twisted by the dark side. It's still Anakin, she's sure of it. He wouldn't hurt her. He was her teacher, the one person who taught her to think for herself. As she steps forward, she silently prays that she still means something to him. That their years together hadn't been for nothing.
But she was wrong.
He was more machine than man. His heart icy cold. There was no warmth in his presence any more. He activates his saber and drives it through her chest, millimeters from her heart. Pain explodes through her body. Even impaled, with his hand around her throat, she continues to beg him. The words coming easily, words she so desperately wanted to say even as she felt her strength leave her.
"*Please, I know Anakin Skywalker is still there! I just know it! He wouldn't have just gone away without a fight. That isn't like him. He's still inside you, Skyguy. Please..."*
"*Anakin Skywalker is dead. That name has no meaning to me anymore."*
"*No...I refuse to believe that...I won't!"*
"*Your fantasy is as amusing as it is pointless. Anakin Skywalker has been dead for three years now. Whatever fragment of sympathy you hoped to garner by bringing up his name is non-existent. "*
His saber deactivates and she collapses to the cold hard, metal deck. As her vision blurs, she watches heavy black boots and jet black cape grow distant. Tears from the pain she felt in her chest, not just from the wound, dripped down her eyes. She closes them, letting Ahsoka Tano die once and for all.
"I was fortunate enough, if you can say that, that a passing Ryn vessel decided that my little hideout was good for salvage. Once the Imperials left, they found me, dunked me in bacta, then took me here." Ahsoka finished her narration in a dull tone. "I guess, I just decided to stay. It's the home of my people after all."
After taking a few moment to absorb everything, Anakin finally whispered. "In some way, I think you did get through to Anakin Skywalker. Otherwise, why did he let you live?"
Ahsoka looked at Anakin with sorrow-filled eyes. "I hope I did. For the longest time I had always believed that some part of the master I knew and loved was still alive. But when he stabbed me..." She reached up to her neck. "The cold metallic fist around my neck, it just..."
Anakin reached out with the Force to supply some comfort to the Togruta Jedi. She tensed at first, as if she wasn't used to the Force touch of another, but then slowly relaxed. "It sounds like my grandfather would have been a fun guy to meet."

"From what I've seen of you, the two of you would have gotten along just fine," Ahsoka chuckled softly. "I've actually kept a small collection of mementos, well, the Ryn kept them after they went through my ship, but they let me have them. Come, I've kind of missing being able to talk 'Force' stuff with someone."
A laser beam lanced down from the sky and erupted in the thicket of trees where they had left the other Peace Brigaders.
"Alema!" Anakin yelled. Relieved as the blue-skinned Twi'lek scampered out of the trees just as another laser burst hit.
"Present! The other guys not so much." Another laser strike. "I think the commander general fell back to Plan B!"
"Plan B?" Ahsoka's voice was drowned out by another ground shaking blast. "That would be B for bombardment, right?"
"Yup!" The three Jedi began to run through the jungle as the orbital bombardment continued.
"She's not trying to kill you anymore?" Alema looked to the Togruta Jedi.
"She knew my grandfather before he became Darth Vader," Anakin said, using the Force to leap over a fallen tree.
"Wow. Small galaxy."
"No kidding."
"This is one of those things I didn't miss!" Ahsoka grumbled, tumbling as a laser blast superheated a tree and peppered them with splinters.
"The running for your life bit?"
"I had enough of that for several lifetimes!" the Togruta Jedi nodded, accepting Anakin's hand and allowing him to help her up.
"Do you have any idea where we're going?" Alema shouted over the shrieking of the laser impacts and frantic cries of the wildlife.
"The old temple is underground," Ashoka replied, "And not far from here. The minerals in the stones blocks sensor readings, so we should be safe there."
"Unless it collapses on us," Alema said brightly.
Anakin dove between several falling trees. "That's thinking positive."
"Over there! To your left!" Ahsoka called out.
The two younger Jedi saw several blocks of heavy, moss-covered stone sticking out of the ground marking the entrance to an underground cave. As the orbital bombardment began to close in on them, all three managed to leap into the cave. The ground shook. Rocks and dirt fell from above. The slabs of rock collapsed over the entrance behind them. Then all was silent.
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"Welcome to my home," Ahsoka said softly, activating several glow sticks.
The cave that they had hurled themselves into was actually a small group of rock-lined rooms. The walls were roughly hewn, and roots stuck out between the cracks of the ceiling panels, but the place was relatively stable. In a room off to the side, several antiquated holoprojectors stood amidst a small variety of objects; an old Clone Trooper helmet with the letters R-E-X, scratched into the material just above the visor, fur-lined gloves, what looked suspiciously like a slave-dancer's outfit, and many more seemingly random momentos.
Ahsoka saw where the two were looking and smiled sadly. "My scrapbook of sorts." She stared at the helmet for a moment, and then shook her head tiredly. "A lot of memories are in that room. The good...and the bad"
She motioned with her hand and floated one of the holoprojectors out. Attached to it was an old holo-camera. " Your grandfather gave this to me as a going away present after my exile. Said it was to record my own adventures and make a name for myself. Of course my first and only mission happened to be the one that saved my life when all the other Jedi were getting killed off."
Ahsoka brought out several, dusty and dilapidating looking pillows. "It isn't much. But I'm not really used to company."
"No, it's okay." Anakin smiled reassuringly.
Ahsoka activated the holoprojector, and a younger version of herself appeared. The older Ahsoka smiled whimsically. "I never thought I'd be showing this to anyone. Although, come to think of it, maybe the Force wanted the two of you to find me. I mentioned earlier that was I was looking for a living planet? Well, I found it, and I actually encountered beings like that Colonel Eas."
Alema and Anakin looked sharply at Ahsoka. "You met Yuuzhan Vong all those years ago?"
"Three of them," Ahsoka nodded. "They were survivors who had been shot down. I thought they were odd because I couldn't sense them through the Force."
"Shot down?"
"Maybe I should start at the beginning," the Togruta Jedi said. "I guess it begins when Anakin Skywaker was still an apprentice to his own master, Obi-Wan. He told me about one mission they had had..."
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Forty-seven years ago

Ahsoka Tano and Anakin Skywalker were gathered around a campfire, trying to draw in what warmth they could. They had crash landed on a frozen-tundra of a world after being shot down by a Separatist cruiser.
"So Snips," Anakin said lightly, hugging the shivering Togruta close to him. The thermal blankets and campfire barely kept the far-below freezing temperature at bay. "You wanted to know about the most interesting world I've ever visited."
"Shouldn't we be trying to get help?"
"Obi-Wan will find us," Anakin said confidently. "Besides, a good story will help take our mind off of our current situation. Which, by the way, is entirely your fault."
"My fault, master? I seem to recall someone saying 'Don't worry, our shields can take anything those tin-cans can throw at us.'"
"And I was supposed to remember that we had our shield generator removed to make room for the refugees we were picking up? A good apprentice is supposed to remind her master of such things."
"And a good master is not supposed to get his good apprentice marooned on a frozen planet. We were heading for a tropical world!" Ahsoka moaned.
Anakin gave her a one-armed hug and used the Force ensure that she received most of the warmth they were absorbing. "Do you want to hear my story or not?"
"Fine."
"That's not the right attitude."
"Fine, master. Can you please tell me of your days aggravating Master Kenobi?"
"Now that's more like it," Anakin said, completely ignoring her sarcasm. "So, I'm going to tell you about this amazing place called Zonama Sekot. Officially, Obi-Wan and I were there to see if we could purchase so of the fighters grown there."
"'Grown'?"
"Yup, from seeds."
"You're joking?"
"Shush and let me tell my tale, my apprentice."
Ahsoka stuck her tongue out at him but fell silent.
"Officially we were there to see if we could purchase some of Zonama Sekot's fighters. You see, it was rumored that they were the fastest in the galaxy and used technology based off of living creatures rather than metal and wires Unofficially, we were there looking for a Jedi who had gone missing earlier. Her name was Vergere and she..."
The memory of the cold crash landing was fresh in sixteen-year old Ahsoka Tano's mind as she stared at the star map laid out on the small

table of her cramped apartment. Her eyes darted from system to system, recalling all of the adventures she had had as a part of the Jedi Order. An Order that had turned its back on her even after everything she had done. She sighed, looking up at the lights filtering through the flimsy plasticrete wall.
Being exiled from the Order meant that she no longer had any income. Whatever was left of her stipends from the various missions she had been on as a Jedi was becoming smaller by the day. She shook her head at that, a sad smile gracing tired features. Her Master had even offered to give her a portion of his paycheck, but she had refused.
The doors to the apartment opened. "Well, Snips. I guess…this is goodbye, huh?"
Ahsoka nodded silently, not saying a word as her Master took a seat next to her.
"Planning on going anywhere in particular?"
"Not really," Ahsoka sighed. "Not many places that aren't caught up in the war. The last thing I need is to run into another Jedi and get lectured all over again."
"I have an idea."
"That sounds dangerous," Ahsoka replied, a hint of a smile crossing her features.
"Consider this a parting gift," Anakin lightly nudged her. Then, sensing her consent, draped an arm around her shoulder in a loose, one-armed hug. "You want to go somewhere far, far away. I know just the place. Only problem is, you have to find it."
"Master, I quit the Order so I wouldn't have to listen to any more of those cryptic riddles," Ahsoka groaned.
"Bear with me, Snips," Anakin said patiently. "Do you remember the time we were marooned on that ice planet?"
"You mean the time *you* marooned *us* on the ice planet," Ahsoka countered, the white line above one of her eyes rising.
"The details of how we got there aren't important," Anakin said, waving a hand. "But when we crashed there, I told you about this living planet."
"Right, it sounded a little unbelievable," Ahsoka said slowly. "But then again, we did encounter embodiments of the light and dark sides of the Force, take out entire armies by ourselves, and met Sith who were supposed to have been sliced in two and tossed down a bottomless pit."
"Anyways, the planet is actually pretty interesting to talk to. Got under Obi-Wan's skin a bit with its unique set of beliefs."
"Oh?"

"I'll let you find out for yourself. That is, if you want to go there," Anakin pulled out a datapad. "This is all the data I could gather about its sightings and possible whereabouts."
"Master, these are official reports from the Jedi Archives," Ahsoka noted dryly.
"They are?" Anakin took the datapad back and stared at it long and hard. Finally he shook his head and handed the datapad back to her with a cocky grin. "Can't be. There aren't any files like these ones in the Order's databases. Not unless somebody erased it…"
Ahsoka just bowed her head, trying hard not to let Anakin see her cry.
"I thought you'd just like some sort of starting point," Anakin said, pulling his apprentice to him almost protectively. "Here I am, about to let my best apprentice out into the cold hard galaxy with just a datapad and a holocam. Some master I am."
"You're the best," Ahsoka whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you by not becoming a full Jedi or someone important."
"You *are* someone important already," Anakin whispered back, his prosthetic hand rubbing one of her arms. "You're my apprentice. I would only have been disappointed if you had chosen to do what was expected of you instead of what *you* wanted to do."
"But you tried to convince me to stay in the Order."
"Blame that on Obi-Wan and the other Masters. I told them you had to choose your own path."
Ahsoka emitted a choked laugh and nodded. "Thank you, for everything."
"And thank you, Snips," Anakin placed a brief kiss on the top of her developing montral. "You've definitely helped make *me* a better Jedi. Good luck, and may the Force be with you."
-()- -()-
"This is Ahoska Tano, day twenty-two. I have to be out of my mind, searching for a living planet that can talk to you. Not like I have a lot of options at the moment though. While I'm searching the butt-end of space, I wonder what's happening in the rest of the galaxy. Anyways, I've finally managed to track down the spice freighter crew mentioned in Skyguy's datapad. Not easy considering that they were scattered across several different planets. I'm <u>finally</u> on course to this Zonama Sekot. And of course, while I'm on this quest for a crazy planet, I hear that the Separatists have attacked Coruscant. Hopefully this trip will be worth it."
"*Day thirty. I'm approaching Zonama Sekot now…it's…it's not anything I ever thought. I thought Anakin was joking when he said it was a living planet. I can feel it. It's so alive."*

"Day thirty-one. I was shot out of the sky by the Sekotian fighters. Hope the place I rented the ship from has 'fired on by sentient planet insurance'. Once I explained why I was here to the…planet, it let me live. There is so much here, I just can't describe it. It's so alive, so… nothing like I've ever seen. It's amazing. I thought this mission was a punishment of some sorts, but now…how many people can say that they've actually had a conversation with a planet? I definitely owe Anakin a huge 'thank you.' Being here, even for a short time, has already challenged my views on many things."
"Day thirty-two. And I thought I'd seen everything when I met a talking planet. There are actually beings here that are outside of the Force. There are three of them. They use some type of worm on this planet to translate what I'm saying to them. Apparently they were the lowest class in their society. They fled one of their ships when their people attacked this planet. Zonama Sekot thought their escape pod was hostile and shot it down. But, just like me, it gave them a chance. I wonder what the Jedi Masters would say about these people? I mean, if the Force flows to everyone but them? I bet Master Windu would go cross-eyed trying to think about what it would mean."
"Day thirty-five, I've managed to get a small understanding of their language. Their people attacked Zonama Sekot because they thought the planet was the origin of their own home planet. Like Sekot, these Yuuzhan Vong use living creatures and plants for the basis of their culture. The only difference is that I can't feel them, or their tech, in the Force. I have no problem sensing Zonama Sekot's biotech, so I wonder what created the change.
Speaking of change, I know that I'm far away from Coruscant, but my bond to Anakin has been weakening lately. I can't explain it and I don't know what's going on in the rest of the galaxy, but I have a very bad feeling about it."
The holoprojector sputtered and froze on Ahsoka's pensive expression. A much older and tired looking Ahsoka Tano reached out sadly at her younger self. "I stayed on Sekot for another week before I started feeling everyone die. When I left, it jumped to hyperspace again. I never thought I would see another Yuuzhan Vong until I felt the absence in the Force that Colonel Eas left."
"You do know that they're invading our galaxy now?" Alema said.
"Of course. Just because I'm hiding under a rock doesn't mean I've completely shut out the rest of the galaxy. From what I learned from those…what were they called again? The casteless ones."
"Shamed Ones?" Anakin supplied.

"Yes! That was the name. From what I learned from them, their original homeworld was probably the source of Zonama Sekot's sentience, a seed-planet. When it died, the Yuuzhan Vong had nowhere to call home. In order to keep themselves united, they waged war on whoever they could in hopes of finding a new place to stay."
"Well, they have Coruscant now," Alema pointed out.
"A symbolic home, maybe," Ahsoka shook her head. "But something tells me that Coruscant and Yuuzhan Vong don't really go well together. Instead of fighting this war, give the Yuuzhan Vong another option. Find Zonama Sekot and talk with it. If it will let them live on it, then the Yuuzhan Vong won't have to fight for a world or settle on a world that doesn't suit them."
"We have to find a planet that can go to hyperspace on its own?"
"Hey, I didn't say it would be easy," Ahsoka said. "But this war will be just like all the others. Too many people, too many Jedi, will lose their lives. Give the Yuuzhan Vong a world they can call their own and you take away their reason for fighting."
"Even if we did find Zonama Sekot, the Supreme Overlord and the Yuuzhan Vong commanders won't accept a peace deal. They would lose too much status and prestige in their society. Warmasters have no place in a peaceful civilization. Neither would warriors." Anakin countered.
"And what of the Jedi? Will the galaxy need them after the war? Your jobs can easily be taken by diplomats and commandos. That was one of the problems with the old Order, they tried to have a hand in everything in the galaxy, but didn't excel at anything," Ahsoka pointed out. "Getting back to topic. Eventually one or both sides will have to stop fighting this war. Someone needs to take the steps and make sure that happens. If you want to honor your grandfather's name and memory; that someone might as well be you."
"Great, stop an intergalactic war, no pressure."
"Anakin," Ahsoka said softly, she sounded pained just by saying his name. "I can sense within you great potential, but also a great darkness. You are strong in the Force, there is no denying this. Whether you use this strength to protect others or to rule over them, only time will tell. Just know that whatever journey you have ahead of you; you should not go through it alone. Even great men fall. Your grandfather tried to walk his path all by himself and hid his feelings from everyone. He was much more powerful than the other Jedi, and stood out from them in many ways. Despite his leadership abilities and strengths, when it came down to it, he was alone. When he needed help, he didn't have anyone to turn to but that blasted Emperor. Don't

make that same mistake. Don't mistake subordinates, teachers, or acquaintances for true friends. Stopping an intergalactic war may seem like a huge burden, but it is not one you have to take up by yourself. It's called the 'Jedi Order' and not the 'Lone Jedi' for a reason."
"So I've been told," Anakin said with a faint smile.
"Ahsoka," Alema said abruptly. "You mentioned that his grandfather was searching for a Jedi Knight named Vergere, right?"
Anakin's head whipped back to the Twi'lek in understanding. "You think she's the one?"
"She did come here with the scarheads."
Ahsoka watched the brief exchange. "Wait, you two know Vergere?
"We know *a* Vergere. The last time I saw her, she was a quasi-master to my older brother," Anakin said slowly. "But like Alema said, she came with the Yuuzhan Vong to this galaxy."
"Well then, she *is* most likely the one I was looking for," Ahsoka looked a bit dumbstruck by the odd coincidence. "I take back all the bad things I said about the Force. That's just…"
"Odd?" Alema said.
"That's one way to put it. And I thought I was out of touch with the rest of the galaxy. She missed the entire downfall of the Jedi Order and the Republic. Not to mention the rise and fall of the Empire. I wonder what it's like for her; coming back to learn that everyone she knew died and that the galaxy is different from what she had left."
"She didn't seem all that broken up about it," Alema shrugged.
"I never personally knew Vergere," Ahsoka said. "But many Jedi of my time were very good at hiding their emotions. Feeling anything other than peace and serenity was frowned upon." The last part was said bitterly.
Ignoring the tone, Anakin cocked his head. "Wouldn't that make going to war hard?"
"I said it was frowned upon, I didn't say it didn't happen. Several Jedi that I knew were consumed by the constant death and destruction. A couple lost their minds. Others, like me, gave up being a Jedi altogether. For an order that prided itself on keeping the peace, we were a bit too efficient at waging war. Or maybe that's just hindsight talking. War and Jedi are not supposed to go well together. It is why you must end this war as quickly as possible. Wars warp and destabilize the Jedi Order and the Jedi within. It leaves the Order open to…other threats."
"The Sith." Alema said wisely.
"If there is one lesson I learned all those years ago, is that the Sith are never truly gone." Ahsoka's eyes hardened as she looked away. "They

will continue to be in the shadows, waiting for moments like this, when the Jedi Order is distracted, to rebuild. It is when this war is over that your Jedi Order and its masters need to be the most vigilant. I've already lived through one massacre. I have no wish to live through another."
"First we have to end the war," Anakin nodded. "But Alema and I will heed your warning. Thank you."
With her warnings and message delivered, Ahsoka seemed to deflate. She looked more than a little tired as she made her way to her bedroll.
"Forgive me. I have not had guests in a long while and conversation tires me out."
"It's okay," Anakin said. "Alema and I should probably get back to our fighters, if Rinmek hasn't blasted them yet."
A wan smile. "Go, Anakin. I am glad that this new Jedi Order has someone like you to carry on and improve on the traditions of the past."
"Will we see you again?" Anakin said softly.
"Don't worry, I'm not going to die just yet," Ahsoka replied, her voice tinged with amusement. "After all, I still need to see if you do right by your grandfather's name."
"Anakin," Alema said tersely, gripping her lambent saber. "Vong."
Anakin glanced back towards the slabs of rock that covered the entrance. He slipped his red saber onto his utility belt and summoned his own lambent one into his hand. In a single moment, he could feel the absences left by the presence of several Yuuzhan Vong warriors.
"Colonel Eas had friends."
"Great, this should be fun," Alema grinned grimly.
Ahsoka glanced at both Jedi. "The two of you can sense Yuuzhan Vong?"
"Long story," Anakin said briefly, he could sense something else with the warriors. "Tell you about it after this."
A familiar howl made its way through the cracks in the stone slab over the entrance.
"A voxyn!" Alema paled.
"Now we know how they found us," Anakin nodded. He hooked his lambent saber to his belt as well, and his perception of the Yuuzhan Vong faded away. "Ahsoka, why don't you stay back and enjoy your nap? Alema and I have got this covered."
"The action and near death things are better suited for the young anyways," Ahsoka said with the faintest of smile. "Good luck, Anakin Solo. For what it's worth, may the Force be with you."

Anakin held out both his hands and concentrated. With a tremendous blast of Force energy, he sent the slabs blocking the entrance flying outwards like massive missiles. Before the dust even settled, Alema had activated both her sabers and had sprung out of the opening like a silver and orange whirlwind. A sickly looking voxyn was the first to fall, its Yuuzhan Vong handler second. The remaining warriors moved to converge on Alema and didn't notice Anakin until another two of their number had fallen.

Advancing through the cloud of dust with his red blade glowing, Anakin once again drew in the surrounding warmth into his off hand and converted the heat into a blast of Force-created flame. The Yuuzhan Vong warrior charging him immediately ignited, and he roared in pain, thrashing about in an attempt to put out the flame. Anakin ended the warrior's life with a clean stroke of his blade, silencing him. In the background, Alema took care of another two warriors.

Now only four Yuuzhan Vong remained. The four had only stayed on the sidelines and watched their companions get slaughtered, making no move to help. When both Jedi turned to face them, Anakin and Alema's heart rates accelerated significantly.

"Greaaat. Super-Vong."

"This group is probably dedicated to tracking down Jedi."

"Then let's show them that they picked the wrong prey."

The four Yuuzhan Vong warriors spread out in equal distance around the two Jedi. Each of them pulled out giant sword-like coufees while allowing bone-like claws to emerge from their hands.

"Still going to use your red saber, Anakin?" Alema remarked, standing back-to-back with him. "If I come back without you, a certain group of people will kill me."

"Good point. Experiment later." Anakin changed sabers, the elite warriors of Yun-Yammka filling his perceptions.

The four warriors attacked in perfect unison, massive blades swinging at Alema and Anakin at four different levels. Rather than block, the two Jedi rolled out of the way, coming up between two warriors each. The warriors reacted by lashing out with their clawed off-hand. Alema opted to cleave off one of the hands and let the other lock with her lightsaber. Anakin just leaped back once more and avoided both.

Alema engaged in close quarters combat with her two Vong. She used one of their thick blades as a springboard to launch herself over the one-armed warrior. Landing behind him, she slashed at him several times, then rolled back under his counter-attack to slash at the other warrior. Like a graceful dancer, she flitted around their massive blades and clawed hands. Ducking. Weaving. Her anger towards the Yuuzhan

Vong channeled into her muscles. When one of the sword-like coufee made contact with her mid-riff, she pulled back with lightning fast reflexes, and the blade didn't even have time to break the skin. She was a blur. Lithe and agile. Turning the size and strength of the Yuuzhan Vong elite soldiers against them. In one of her rolls, she lopped off both legs of a warrior. Coming up, she then used her sabers to redirect the sword of the other warrior down into the head of his companion.

The remaining warrior was quickly overwhelmed by the bright flashes of her sabers. No longer having to worry about her back, Alema focused all of her anger and hate of the Yuuzhan Vong onto this one warrior. Heat began to stream from her entire body and her blood felt as if it was boiling beneath her skin, but she did not care. Her entire being, every ounce of rage, was now dedicated to striking down the warrior in front of her. She continued to grow faster, her muscles pushed to their breaking points. All it took was one miss-step on the part of the Yuuzhan Vong warrior, and Alema leaped over the warrior. When she landed, the warrior's head was divided into three sections.

Where Alema was a blazing form of fury, Anakin's demeanor was the exact opposite. One of glacial calm. He expressed nothing as he took on the attacks of both warriors. He himself did not attack or give much ground. Rather he let his opponents continuously wear themselves down against his blade. His stalwart demeanor, even as the warriors continued to hammer his violet blade with blow after blow, only served to anger his opponents.

The number and frequency of their attacks increased with a new ferocity. Anakin was finally forced to take several steps back as he weathered the new bombardment. Still, however, he did not attack. This continued to heighten the rage of his opponents, their movements growing reckless as they sought to strike down the one in front of them who dared deny them the honor of a fight.

Then, in a single moment, Anakin was suddenly a blur of motion. He let both sword-like coufee glide along either side of him, the Yuuzhan Vong blades just missing him by millimeters. The warriors had been expecting yet another impact with Anakin's unyielding blade and were unprepared for the continued arc of their weapons. Before either could compensate, Anakin lopped off their over-stretched arms, then removed their heads. Without looking back at the corpses, Anakin deactivated his saber and walked back towards Alema.

Silence fell on the jungle once more.

Alema was on her hands and knees, breathing harsh as the rage left her body, leaving her weak and sore. Despite her state, she lifted her head and gave Anakin a faint smile. "That was fun."
"They even left us a ship," Anakin pointed to the Peace Brigade shuttle that was in a clearing made by the earlier bombardment. "Think Rinmek knew he had Yuuzhan Vong with him?"
"Probably. Then again, it did sound like he was being kept out of the loop." Alema accepted Anakin's hand and got to her feet on shaky legs. "Ow, ouch. Okay. Won't be doing that for a while."
"There's a reason why what you did is considered a dark side ability," Anakin said dryly.
"Nothing wrong with a little anger," Alema said. "Had to vent it somehow."
"Right, just tone it down when we're around the other masters. Last thing we need is to be suspected of going dark."
"I'm not that dumb. Besides, you're the one with the 'I'm-a-Sith' red saber."
"I'll keep it hidden. I'm not that dumb," Anakin retorted, helping Alema to the shuttle. "Besides, the color of a saber shouldn't determine one's alignment in the Force."
"Reclaiming the color red from the Sith? They won't appreciate that at all." Alema relaxed against the co-pilot's seat, her tendons popping as she did.
"I'll apologize to them when they come out of hiding," Anakin said wryly. "Strap yourself in. I'm not sure if Rinmek called for help."
"Can we go find our friends without any more side-trips this time?"
Anakin smiled his father's smile. "No promises, Rar."
"I was afraid you were going to say that."
-()- Chapter End -()-
A\N: Hoped everyone enjoyed Anakin, Alema, and Ahsoka's (so many 'A' names) appearance. Destiny's Way is next, and questions about what happened to some of the characters, Anja among them (again another 'A'!), are answered. Oh, and Anakin will have his own character arc and Jacen will have his. There may be some similarities, but when it comes down to it, I plan for the both of them to end up in two very different situations at the end of the sequel and let everyone's head-canon do the rest.
Memo to self: In the Star Wars universe, according to the wiki, a week is five days, a month is thirty-five days, and a year is ten months...info that would have been handy to know *before* I had completed over 2/3rds of the story. Is it still retcon if the chapters haven't been posted yet =)?

Edited 4/17/13- To keep story to canon Ahsoka-wise